Online Catch

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Online Catch

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Summary

Jack Crawford concocts a plan to lure Hannibal out of hiding... with uploading Will's profile on an international online dating site. Without Will's consent, of course. Happens after season 2. Hannibal/Will, slash

Notes

Contains solid Season 2 spoilers!

Warnings: moderate slash scenes, non-descriptive mentions of hetero-sex, mild language, explicit imagery of alcohol consumption, mild imagery of prescription drug abuse, and mild mentions of canon-typical violence.
If you need more specific warnings, feel free to add me on Skype (my ID: maitai1327) where I can personally answer any questions you might have before you read the story.

Thanks so much to Silverfeathered_Angel for the wonderful betawork.

Plans

Jack Crawford really meant to talk about his idea to Will. While he was crossing the path leading to the entrance of the lonely house, he was still lost deep in his thoughts to figure out how to present his plan in the least awkward way. When he finally deemed the potential part of the dialogue ready, he rang the doorbell with a firm push.

No answer.

Jack made an absent-minded motion to adjust the collar of his coat. Five months had passed, but the scars were still distantly aching. Was it going to be like this for the rest of his life? Or did he just need some more patience before it all went away?

When he didn't hear the approaching steps of Graham, he pushed the button of the doorbell again. Then again.

Still no answer.

He chose to try whether the front door was locked, and it opened on the first attempt.

As Jack stepped in, he caught site of Will in the living room, lying on the creaking, old sofa, which had a dim, worn shade of brownish green, sleeping with half of his limbs uncomfortably hanging from the piece of furniture. Crawford entered the place, and Graham opened his bloodshot eyes, lightly lifting his head up from the edge. "J-Jack?"

"Are you alright?" Jack risked the question.

A muffled, numb groan. "Er, I'm... yes, I am, I'm just... I'm still on heavy medication... because... because of the wound, you know," Will bumbled, then let his head fall back on the armrest of the sofa.

Crawford had a look at the empty bottle of Scotch standing on the coffee table. The distinctive smell of alcohol drifting from the direction of the cheap, stained jacket covering the younger man's shoulders was quite suggestive, too.

"Did you drink all of that alone?" Jack's voice turned from astonished to concerned. "Will, this is utterly dangerous, particularly together with medicines."

"I'm okay." Will closed his eyes wearily, while mumbling, "I'm just... I'm just tired and I need some sleep. Can you come back later, at another time?"

Yes, Jack really meant to talk about his idea. But as he stood there, looking at Graham's broken, crumpled figure, he couldn't stop thinking that the poor man was literally a wreck, both mentally and physically, and upsetting him with plans and ideas would be sheer cruelty. He was not even sure that Will was in the condition to be capable of understanding more than two or three coherent sentences.

Therefore, Crawford went into Will's bedroom instead, searched for a bluish blanket which wasn't completely covered with dog hair, and returned to put it around Graham's shoulders. Will slightly flinched at the touch on his arm, but he didn't open his eyes.

Jack saw that there was no use staying there. Will was supposedly not under life-threatening conditions, and he couldn't help. He felt some remorse for not visiting earlier, and he promised to himself that he was going to come around tomorrow to check on Graham.

As he left, ponderingly tapping his restored FBI badge under his long, black coat on his way to his car, the vague thought crossed his mind that, perhaps, he had never really wanted to ask for Will's permission in the first place, knowing that the answer to his idea would be undoubtedly, "No". And now he just grabbed the first suitable excuse, namely, Graham's miserable condition...

Jack quickly tried to avert this idea, because he didn't particularly enjoy it. No. He wanted to do this the right way, but seeing the impossible state Will was in, he was left with no other choice. And that was it. There was no room for further questions.

Bedelia Du Maurier had imagined her stay in Europe to be much more thrilling than it turned out to be. She'd expected her escape together with Hannibal Lecter to be the adventure of her life; a real incalculable mystery. Now she had to admit that she had been awfully mistaken.

Her former colleague was unable to overstep the past, and concentrate on anything else but the dark disappointment he felt over Will's betrayal. And, since Bedelia was still the closest he had to a therapist, he shared all his thoughts about the topic with her.

Every second day, Hannibal was determined to convince himself that the way Will had figuratively stabbed him in the back was the end of all what he had together with the younger man... But the other days, he shared long monologues with Doctor Du Maurier about his plans to find a way to send signs to Will... To creep back inside his head... To make him unable to forget... To remind him... To stay with him from afar...

First, Bedelia tried to list him rational reasons why Hannibal should just leave Will's memory behind and completely turn his attention towards his future – which didn't include Will in any way. After seeing that these attempts had been in vain, she tried to simply switch the topic, but sooner or later, all conversations ended somehow with Will.

Lately, she didn't even bother any more. She had gotten used to Hannibal's changes of mind about Graham, and almost from the first blink every morning, she could already figure out if Doctor Lecter had one of his days of 'Giving up on Will' or the ones when he was over-occupied with creating endless, risky plans to catch Will's attention again and torment him from the distance.

Bedelia understood that this was not easy for Hannibal. For a psychopath with a badly repressed god-complex, nothing could be worse than becoming confronted by the fact that he couldn't possess the things he wanted the most. Also, the dark, burning wish of his hurt pride

for vengeance tormented Lecter like poison. But for Doctor Du Maurier, this started to get less and less interesting.

And, ultimately, all of their dialogues uncontrollably spiraled into Hannibal's unavailing, constant pining after his only friend.

On a Wednesday morning, as Bedelia was sitting by the round, shiny-polished marble table of the hotel's restaurant, she started to definitely feel that this got too much for her.

Hannibal was sitting opposite her, in his tailor-made, reddish brown, three-piece suit with a matching patterned tie and cream-colored shirt. The doctor was slowly eating a salad. Bedelia had long finished her omelet, being the one who mutely listened, while Hannibal kept minutes-long pauses between each bite to discuss some details of a new idea that occurred to him throughout the night.

This was one of the days of 'Not letting Will forget about his betrayal until the end of time', so Bedelia had to keep listening to an extensive explanation on how Hannibal wanted to send a distant message to Graham in the form of a mutilated corpse – in a way only Will was capable of understanding. However, when it emerged from the train of thought that what Doctor Lecter had described during the complete breakfast was only the first step of a way more complex plan he had just started to introduce, Doctor Du Maurier couldn't help but interrupt.

"What is it that makes you this persistent?" she asked, hoping that she might be able to change the direction of the conversation before she would be forced to become familiar with the whole plan.

Hannibal was just about to pin a half shrimp from his salad on his fork, but now his hand froze in the middle of the motion. Bedelia expected the usual answer about avenging betrayal, but Doctor Lecter's face turned strangely pale and stiff instead, and then suddenly, he admitted, "I still want his friendship."

Doctor Du Maurier felt a brush of sadness run through her mind.

"Do you understand the impossibility of this wish?" she replied earnestly. "You can't control him. If you could, you wouldn't be interested in him. A submissive puppet is not what you need. You would get bored with him, you could not respect him for who he is and for what his mind hides. All the beauty you admire now would crumble in front of your eyes if you saw him lose his own personality and the things that make him strong and unique... But if he stays who he is, he'll always betray you. Don't you see this?"

Hannibal maintained eye contact, cold and without a stir, like a reptile. "I understand this, yes."

"So why don't you just let it go?"

"Because I'm unable to."

And the next moment, Doctor Lecter continued explaining his pointless plan again.

Jack was sitting in his FBI office, staring at the screen of his palmtop. He spent the last hours browsing online dating sites for adults living in all different corners of the world. He filtered those out in the first round which proved to be dubious or frivolous, and continued to re-check the ones that seemed to be reliable, respectful web pages to find partner for long-term relationships.

He was searching for the appropriate website to upload Will's profile.

He felt content, as he pondered over his plan while clicking from window to window. *This is going to annoy that bastard to no end. Seeing that Will got over his tortures so soon... That Will searches for a peaceful life with a nice, decent woman, and tries to build normal relationships with normal human beings... That monster simply won't be able to ignore the fact that he is this easily losing the leverage he believed to have over his former friend. And if he contacts Will, I'll be here to decoy him into a trap and catch him.*

Jack paused for a moment to let the idea fill his head with the forceful, burning wish to succeed, and then he returned to his determined search for the proper site.

Bedelia was alone in the lounge of the hotel, under a palm tree planted in a wooden pot behind her armchair. She held her iPad on her left knee, and solved an over-repeated crossword puzzle. It was still more interesting than listening to Hannibal's lengthy musing over Will Graham in the room they shared on the fourth floor.

She wished to get a job or some free time hobby, which could fill her days. But she agreed with Hannibal on not showing up at any public event or applying for any kind of position before the end of the year, in order to avoid attracting some unwanted attention. So all she could do was sit in her hotel room or in the corner of the lounge, and spend her time browsing online.

Most probably, this dull, lonely inactivity was the reason why she first clicked on the web page called International Love.

Start

Will woke up with a splitting headache. The sun was already up, and the sharp, glaring sunbeams sneaked into the room through the slits of the shutters. At first, he threw the blanket over his face to cover his eyes from the rays of light, but then the nausea of hangover forced him to get up anyway.

Scrambling to his feet from the sofa, all his muscles seemed to instantly fill with stinging pain following the torpid insensitivity. Will tried to remember how he got in this horribly inconvenient lying position, but he could recall none of it.

Before getting lost too deep in the lack of memories creating a dark gap in his mind, he turned and limped into the bathroom to vomit. Then he held his face under gushing cold water, letting it wake him up to a more secure degree.

On returning to the living room, Will started to search for a gulp of whisky, but to his unpleasant surprise, he found the bottle empty. Somehow, yesterday, he'd managed to drink the whole bottle of Scotch he had kept in the back of the kitchen cupboard, and had years ago received as an old Christmas present from the students he had taught at the FBI Academy. Now he didn't have anything else, only a few drops glittering on the bottom of three or four dust-stained wine bottles standing on his kitchen table. But it was far from enough to start the day.

Will had to stagger back into the bathroom to do something with his looks, so that he could get in an appropriate condition to leave his house and buy something to drink, in spite of the constant, painful, nauseated feeling in his stomach caused by even the faintest idea of drinking alcohol ever again. But the last thing he wanted was to sober up and let his thoughts become clear in his head. Anything was better than that... Even the cheap, muddy, counterfeited vodka sold at the small store behind the gas station, the closest place where he could buy liquor.

But before he could successfully drive a stubborn wisp of hair away from his forehead with his shaking palm, the loud ringing of his doorbell rushed through the house. Will's mouth squirmed. *No... Not a visitor again.* Jack Crawford's sudden visit had been embarrassing enough yesterday, if it really had happened. Hopefully, it was just a drunken dream.

Will made a last attempt to solve the miserable condition of his sticky, unkempt hair, but when the motion ended with no visible results, he shrugged impatiently, and turned to a towel to wipe off the cold drops of water from his twelve-day beard. Meanwhile, he hoped that whoever the person ringing his doorbell might be was going to get bored and leave. But he would soon see that he had set his hopes too high. The doorbell was ringing again. And again. And again.

Will spat a curse under his breath while heading for the door with slow, uncertain steps. As he finally opened it, he found Jack Crawford in the doorway. The older man was wearing a long, black coat with a gray scarf, and had a suitcase and some documents in his hands.

“Hello,” Will’s vocal chords didn’t completely obey to form an intelligible word, and the greeting he uttered sounded much harsher and grating than he aimed it to be.

“Hello, Will. May I come in?”

“If really necessary.” Will kept his eyes on a spot above Crawford’s left shoulder in the blank air.

“I would like you to assist me with some procedural tasks.”

Will didn’t move away from the way to let the older man in, only asked in a hoarse croak, “Like what?”

“Like filling this form for example.” Jack showed the few clipped papers he was holding in his left hand. “It’s nothing urgent, but I was considering refreshing personal data in the FBI database. Some perfunctory occupational tasks...”

“I don’t work with the Bureau any longer.”

“All bios must be updated, even for former associates.”

Will still didn’t step away; he kept holding one of his hands on the door handle. “Does this have anything to do with the investigation concerning me?”

“No, this is only a general routine procedure they need us to comply with.” Jack rotated the papers in his hand. The motion seemed secretly nervous. “Look, this doesn’t take longer than five minutes. Why don’t you just fill this form about your personal data right now, and then I’ll leave?”

The prospect of Jack leaving as soon as possible slightly brightened Will’s mood.

“Okay, hand me the papers,” he consented, still languidly though.

There was something strangely expectant in the way Crawford followed him as Will sat down on the sofa, and placed the papers in front of him on the coffee table.

Will took the pen he had used to sign his fast food order last weekend when the delivery guy couldn’t find his own, and forgetting about it, he had left it on the table. Now he started to scribble down the answers to the questions included in the form. However, after filling the top fields with his basic personal data, he found the nature of the following questions quite odd.

“What is my favorite song?!” Will quoted with a snort, a lifeless grimace lingering on his lips. “What the hell is this?”

“I didn’t understand the reason for these kind of personal questions, either, but I also had to add these pieces of information to my own files,” Jack told him, looking fixedly at Will’s pen, suspiciously avoiding eye contact. “Maybe, this has something to do with the new employment policy they introduced last month. A more worker-friendly office environment, and a bunch of other useless modern directives.”

“I’ll skip this nonsense,” Will growled, and pushed his pen and the papers away.

“No, no,” Jack protested with abrupt vehemence. “Just a few minutes, I don’t ask for more. I need to get this all done. You know, there has been huge pressure on me since I was reinstated, and I’m expected to follow protocol impeccably.”

Will spent a few seconds considering how he could get rid of Crawford sooner, and finally he decided that doing as Jack wanted would likely raise the chances of him to promptly leave. So he settled for filling the blanks with a resigned pull at the corner of his mouth.

“Okay,” he said, taking his pen again. “But don’t suppose that I’ll deeply contemplate my answers.”

“I’m of the opinion that I should send an ear to him first, in a carved wooden box. How does this sound according to you?” Hannibal leaned back in the deep purple, velvet-covered armchair placed in the corner of the five-star hotel room classified as honeymoon suite. They had checked in as a freshly married couple two days ago. His hands were folded on one knee, his dark, cold eyes darting at the woman sitting opposite him.

Bedelia kept her iPad on her lap, typing a message online. She replied, distracted, “What made you change your mind about the malar bone you mentioned the day before yesterday?”

As a response, Hannibal brought up a long psychological explanation, which made it possible for Doctor Du Maurier to direct her attention completely towards the message she was writing. She knew that Doctor Lecter’s theory was about to last at least four or five minutes before he would address her a new question.

Bedelia found the online dating site International Love she had discovered quite entertaining, and Hannibal didn’t mind her chatting online while he was talking about Graham. Doctor Lecter could have just talked to an empty room, it wouldn’t have made a big difference to him, he was that deeply lost in his thoughts.

And finally, their inert staying at hotels became a bit more interesting for Doctor Du Maurier. Even though the Welsh banker she lately exchanged messages with started to lose his charm after he had claimed to go to play squash one afternoon, and then wrote the next day about the fun he’d had yesterday with his friends at a golf club. Also his English was badly-repressed low-class, so after a few seconds of deliberating, Bedelia deleted him from her contact list.

But the middle-aged businessman from Chile still kept his attractiveness after six or seven detailed messages. Therefore, now she composed a longer, friendly reply about her stay in Paris.

Crawford sat down in his office, and switched his palmtop on. He felt some mild remorse because of deceiving Will with the lie he had told about updating the FBI database, but he comforted himself with the excuse that he had no other choice. He had to ask these details from Will, otherwise, if he had answered these questions by his own intuition, it would have resulted in an overtly false profile. And Doctor Lecter would have been easily able to figure out the scam. No. Jack had to solve this the way he did. He did nothing wrong.

He took the paper Will wrote his answers on, and copied the replies into the fields appearing on his screen. He started to create a profile for Will on the website called International Love.

After a few minutes of careful typing, Jack finished to fill the general data in. Now there were only those questions left, which regarded the applicant's preferences for dating and relationships. He couldn't ask these from Will, but didn't need help with answering them, either. After marking the Items 'Only Interested in Women' and 'For Serious Relationship' from a bizarrely long list, he turned to choose what type of woman Will was searching for. Trying not to be too specific, he only ticked off some basic expectations such as a reasonable age limit and a positive attitude towards dogs.

As he was done, his last task was to write something into the general description field of the profile. He started to wonder what could be the most annoying phrasing to read for Hannibal, if Doctor Lecter happened to find Will's profile.

Finally, he typed the sentence, 'I want to start a new life and a family', guessing that this was enough to pin into Lecter like a needle. Since he didn't want to sound too conversational, this was the only thing he added to the description field.

And then, Jack switched the screen to search for the most appealing photo of Will in the FBI data base.

Messages

Jack Crawford soon realized what a horrible idea it was to upload Will's profile on International Love. His initial supposition was that he would have to reply to at best two or three messages per day. After the death of his beloved wife, he spent all his free time alone, and he had guessed that he would have more than enough time after work, in the evening, to compose shrewd replies to any kind of mails Will might receive. He was wrong.

Right from the first hour after the registration, an avalanche of messages started to flood the mailbox he had created for Will on the site, and with time, the amount even worsened.

And since he didn't want to miss a chance to find Hannibal's possible message, he had to read and reply to all mails with due diligence, even to the shortest and dumbest ones. Although he found it very unlikely that Doctor Lecter would try to get in touch with Will in a brief message full of grammatical errors and childish emoticons, calling Will 'cutie' and making some strong sexual suggestions in the most vulgar ways possible, Jack felt determined not to let anything escape his attention. Therefore, he gave some neutral reply to all kinds of mails until it became perfectly clear that the sender was truly not interested in anything else but the things she had first implied. In such case, Crawford quickly deleted the sender from Will's contact list, adding her to a file he was compiling on his palmtop about the uninteresting users.

There were some women who seemed very promising at first. For example, instantly calling him 'Will' despite the fact that Jack indicated his name as William in the profile, without mentioning how he preferred to be called. And some were asking remarkable questions about his past. But they also turned out to be irrelevant after a short while.

After three weeks of spending all his nights online, replying either to the most boring or to the most outrageous messages he had ever seen in his whole life, no wonder Crawford started to give up hope.

Will dreamt about Hannibal again.

They were having a session in the doctor's office, talking about a hypothetical question of the afterlife maybe, though after waking up, Will couldn't clearly recall the details of the conversation. The only thing he could remember was the familiar shadows of the bookcases falling on him. For a few seconds after opening his eyes, he still felt Hannibal's presence, and it surrounded him with the numb fear of something terrible happening, abhorrence... and then with strangely calm, familiar warmth.

This was one of the reasons Will didn't stop taking his painkillers after the three months his doctors had suggested, and that he even started heavy drinking.

The psychoactive effect took away his ability to shape clear thoughts about his past and about his present situation, or to figure out any future plans. This way, he didn't need to concentrate on anything, to consider any rational ideas or to understand in depth what had happened to him. This dragged him into a constant, wobbling haze, and gave him a few hours during the night that he could spend with Doctor Lecter.

Hannibal woke up to the shaky, pale light of Bedelia's iPad dancing on his eyelids. She was typing another message online, lying next to him in a violet silk robe on their comfortable double bed.

He normally didn't mind her writing, but this time he had just had a dream about Will and his former office. His friend was upset about an unusually gruesome murder scene he had witnessed, and came to visit him during working hours. Hannibal tried to comfort him with some soothing, composed replies. The doctor was close to talk away the tormented frown from Will's forehead, and the atmosphere of the dream had just started to soften... And right in this moment, the light of the iPad woke him up.

He threw a bad-tempered glimpse at the screen of the device, but the photo he accidentally caught sight of there, made his heart miss a beat. He instantly forgot about the displeasure he felt over waking up... as he saw Will's picture. The so-familiar, bluish, sad eyes managed to make reality completely fade away, and the only thing that filled Hannibal's head was the wish to keep looking into them as long as possible.

But the next moment, Bedelia clicked the window away, and an empty white message box took the picture's place.

It seemed to Hannibal as if a spell which had been cast on him was just alleviated. Seeing Will for a second was both painful like a knife stab and pleasant like a gulp of cold water to a thirsty traveler lost in the desert.

He felt a bit irritated by the intense sudden effect the photo had on him, and tried to explain it with the unexpectedness of it after the dream he had just had. These two together must have been enough to make his brain react in such a dazed manner, with a miserably enthralled gaze at a simple picture.

Hannibal had a look at the electronic display of the hotel's alarm clock standing on his night stand. It was later than midnight. And it seemed simply nonsensical why Doctor Du Maurier would watch Will Graham's photo in the middle of the night, especially in a frame design which reminded Hannibal of the dating site she used lately. No. He must have imagined it. It was just a part of his dream.

But the wish to see the photo again was stronger than any rational deliberation, so he risked the question quietly, "I don't mean to pry into your private conversations, but can you please show me the picture you were looking at a short while ago?"

Bedelia's swiftly typing, beautifully manicured fingers froze on the virtual keyboard. "I didn't realize you were awake," she gave an evasive reply.

"Yes, I am."

There was silence in the room for a while.

"The picture, please." Hannibal repeated.

"Oh, yes, the picture," she echoed with a constrained, faint ghost of a smile on her lips.

She switched windows, and showed the doctor a profile of a young man from the dating site. The man on the photo must have been about 35 years old, with short, maroon hair, and a broad smile on his lips. His bluish green eyes might have shown some similarity to Will's light-colored ones, but nothing else...

Hannibal felt an empty, aching vacancy open in his heart. The photo didn't mean a thing to him. It was not Will. It had never been.

"Thank you," he murmured in a low voice. "Excuse me for interrupting you."

And he turned away, closing his eyes. *It must have been just a dream then*, he told himself. *Certainly, just a vague dream...*

But it strangely hurt, and it didn't go away.

Jack started to discover the growing symptoms of edginess on himself in the past few days whenever he opened a new message Will received from the site called International Love. He became bored with the usual replies he gave, he had enough of reading the disgraceful sexual implications, or answering stupid questions, or listening to the self-told overt lies about some users' age or looks, and particularly of the total lack of hints suggesting that Doctor Lecter would try to get in touch with Graham under an alias.

He was close to believing that the whole idea was just a pointless waste of time. Why would Hannibal browse an online dating site? And even if he did, he wouldn't check men's profiles, only women. With an encrypting program Crawford had stolen from the FBI tech-lab, he had lifted every security from Will's profile which could have hidden it from any kind of online searching throughout the site, but he still found it less and less probable that Hannibal would ever find Will's page.

The whole plan was worthless. It was pure luck Jack didn't bother Graham with the details. He would have just made a fool out of himself with his idea of catching a serial killer with the help of an online dating site. Laughable.

But the end of the day of complete resignation was the time when Caroline123 sent her first message.

"*Hello, Will.*"

It was the only thing she wrote, but it was enough to instantly alert Crawford. He always deemed the use of the name 'Will' a good sign, and the brief, half-friendly-half-distant greeting which accompanied it also seemed noteworthy. And there was something about the user in general that made Jack become interested in her in the blink of an eye.

Her picture was very obscure. A woman sitting at a round café table, turning a bit away from the camera. Even if Crawford had met her several times before, he would have been unable to recognize her from a photo like that. And there was no obvious reason for her not to show her identity. She seemed pretty and elegant as far as Jack could guess from the small-size, blurred picture. Long, blonde and well-groomed hair... White skirt suit with a nipped-in burgundy blouse... That was all Crawford could make out from the ill-lit photo.

She used the name Caroline123, and claimed to be forty years old according to her profile. Since Jack designated the upper age level at forty-two for women who might be potential love interest for Will, he saw that Caroline met the criteria.

There was something about her secretive picture that clearly caught his attention. She wrote very little information about herself on her profile, and didn't even specify her hobbies or her interests.

Jack started with the usual, short, neutral reply, asking Caroline to tell him something about herself.

The Gift

Seeing Will's picture by accident on the screen of Bedelia's iPad had an extraordinary impact on Hannibal's mood. Doctor Du Maurier regarded it as a hopeful sign. Hannibal started to talk less and less, subsided into silence for long hours, and the only topic he mentioned on the rare occasions when he talked at all was his now unchanging plan to send a cut-off ear to Will.

Bedelia guessed that this meant that Doctor Lecter had been getting closer and closer to swallowing his pride and truly implementing at least one of his ideas. He just needed a push in the right direction. And Doctor Du Maurier had her own plan ready, for which this change came in quite handy.

After a day spent visiting the Louvre, they sat down at a nearby café. Bedelia ordered a sorbet flavored with red wine and Brun Fourca grapes, and then she turned to Hannibal, who made some abstracted motions to even a crease on the left sleeve of his gray suit jacket.

"What's on your mind?" she asked. "You seem engrossed."

Exactly as she expected, Hannibal was wrapped up in thinking about Will, and now he started to explain his usual plan about sending the box with the ear.

When Doctor Lecter stopped for a second, Bedelia swiftly inserted the question she was preparing, "Why haven't you already sent it? You've been talking about this for at least eight days now."

The meditative look on Hannibal's face turned a bit forced. He gave a delayed and reserved response, "I'm still considering the right time."

"I don't think so."

The sudden jab of Bedelia's brief reply made Doctor Lecter softly raise his almost invisible eyebrows in surprise. She returned his questioning look with a staid, thoughtful one. Pensive silence lingered around them while they were both sitting still, keeping their eyes on each other without a stir. Finally, Hannibal was the first to slightly turn away to watch the passers-by.

"Perhaps," he admitted slowly, "I'm waiting for *him* to make the first move."

Doctor Du Maurier crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair while answering, "What exactly do you expect?"

"I don't have any concrete expectations. I just want to see that he is unable to forget me."

Bedelia knew that her answer was going to hurt Hannibal, but she also understood that there was no other way to make her point clear.

“You know very well that he is capable of living without you, even if broken and tortured. You are the one who is unable to move on,” she said, unflinching. “And I think the only reason you hesitate to send him something is that you subconsciously sense that it would be the overt proof of what I’ve just told you. You can’t get over him, while he is trying to build his life again from the ruins you left behind.”

Bedelia didn’t let it show, but she was not so sure about the truth of her words, namely the fact that Will was really able to live with the consequences of the both abominable and beautiful friendship he had had with Doctor Lecter. But she wanted to shake Hannibal’s inactive waiting, and turn it into something useful, and this was the only way.

Shocked, even offended pallor spread on Lecter’s sculpture-like features, but the coldness soon melted into lifeless enervation.

“What do you suggest?” he asked in an almost resigned tone.

“First of all, you should stop lying to yourself.”

Silence again.

The waitress served their desserts, and Bedelia took her spoon to pick up a bluish grape from the side of her stem glass. Hannibal made a measured motion to align the silverware around his ice cream, but didn’t start eating. He spent long mute seconds re-organizing the crudely folded napkin provided by the café personnel.

Finally, he looked up at Bedelia, with a spirited glimmer appearing in his eyes.

“Since we don’t have any solid plans for the evening, would you mind accompanying me and look around in some antique shops? We should choose the appropriate box for him. It must be expensive, yet modest, and carved from ebony.” Doctor Lecter lifted his spoon with more vigor in the gesture than ever in the past weeks, and slid the silver into the top of the ice cream, while he added, “Moreover, the night is going to be foggy according to the weather forecast. Ideal time to acquire raw material for the rest of the parcel.”

Bedelia gave him a slight nod with content. This went easier than she expected.

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Caroline123 was a bit weird, and even though as time passed, it seemed less and less probable that she was an alias used by Hannibal Lecter, Crawford found some surprising amusement in exchanging messages with her.

She only wrote one mail per day, always talking about something completely irrelevant. Like global warming or the difficulties of text editing. She wrote one brief paragraph about her chosen topic, finishing it with a sentence including her own opinion. She never answered any questions Jack sent her, and never asked anything in return either. She just wrote her daily few sentences about a strange and perfectly unrelated issue, and that was all.

At first, Jack tried to communicate with her, but she gave absolutely no appropriate reply, she only sent her usual messages. Crawford wondered that maybe it was some kind of test Lecter had concocted to check the virtual Will's reactions in order to figure out if it was really Will he was talking to.

But slowly, Jack started to find it unlikely that Hannibal would write such pointless messages day after day... After a half year spent far away from Will! Lecter was a cunning and calculating person, and a psychiatrist by profession, but Crawford felt almost sure that Hannibal wouldn't waste so much time and energy on such empty nothings, when he could freely ask questions and slip his messages during normal correspondence. Or was this the first step of a complicated mind-game Lecter started to play?

After a week, Jack decided to take up the gauntlet, and gave a suitable reply to Caroline's current topic, which was the question of raising property taxes. He wrote a general description of the topic like she had done, though from a different aspect, and added one sentence with his own opinion.

After that, Caroline's messages started to get longer, but the nature of their content didn't change. She wrote a bit more about her opinion, but never anything with personal details.

Jack guessed that it was a positive sign that she started to become more talkative, so he continued answering with the same method. He hoped that the more she wrote, the more occasions she had where she might unwantedly reveal her true purpose.

And then Caroline disappeared. She didn't write a single word during the whole weekend, and Crawford believed that she got bored and wouldn't send a mail again.

But on Monday, when he arrived home late after a long work day, tired and worn, he found a new message from Caroline123 on his palmtop. It only said, "*I bought a gift for you, Will.*"

Crawford felt his sleepily half-closed eyelids suddenly spring open. This was not just weird... This was suspicious! All the hopes that started to fade away during the past days were reborn in a split second. Hannibal! "*Why?*" he wrote quickly.

And when Caroline123 gave no reply in twenty minutes, Crawford added, "*I don't need your gifts.*"

To his surprise, this time Caroline broke her self-made rule that she wrote only once a day, and she sent a prompt answer, "*I'll mail it to you this week by post.*"

What?! Jack blinked the last fragments of fatigue away, and then typed a reply with furious speed, "*You don't even know my address.*"

"*You can give it to me now.*"

Crawford took a few minutes, considering what his response should be, before he sent, "*What if I say no?*"

"*You won't.*"

The witty response made Jack furrow his brow. He tried to pose distant and surly while playing the role of Will Graham, and this woman – or maybe Lecter himself? – simply ignored his attempt.

"*Are you mocking me?*" he sent the question.

Caroline didn't answer.

Crawford rolled his eyes, and then turned back to writing, "*Alright, if you don't have anything better to do than waste your money on such useless things, send me whatever you want.*" And he added Will's postal address to the end of the message.

Jack felt a bit uncomfortable for sending Will's personal data, but he tried to ignore the feeling. What was the worst that could come out of this? If she was really a woman called Caroline, who just wanted to send a present to a love interest from the distance, Will might get a surprise gift, and that was all. If she was lying about her intent to send something, then nothing would happen. And if this was really Hannibal... Well, Lecter knew Will's address anyway, so it couldn't do any harm if Jack gave it to him now. Could it?

-

The ringing of the doorbell came as a pleasant surprise this time. Will instantly made some efforts to sit up on the sofa, where he was lying, boozing vodka from a half-empty bottle. He needed a high level of concentration in order not to fell from the edge of the piece of furniture while trying to set the bottle on the coffee table. Finally, he managed to complete the motion, and even to avoid stepping on the right forepaw of one of his dogs.

Will expected his pizza order to arrive.

He hadn't eaten a thing in two days, he was already in half-delirium from the mixture of starvation, cheap vodka and occasionally taken medicines, so it was high time that the order he had not long ago placed arrived. He needed some food to ease the burning pain constantly tearing his insides.

Supporting himself with one hand by the door-post, he opened the door, only to see that his visitor was not wearing the uniform of the pizza restaurant, but of a forwarding company.

"Are you Mr. Graham?" the guy asked rapidly.

"Y-yes," Will stuttered, trying to understand what was happening in front of him.

The man briskly placed a small box in Will's hand, and then held a flat screen in his direction. "You should place your electronic signature in the left corner, sir," he explained, probably seeing that Will was not in the condition to figure it out on his own.

"What is this?" Will growled, regaining his ability to react, but numbly keeping the packaged box in the same position the delivery guy gave it to him.

"You got a gift from Paris, sir. Your signature, please?"

Will felt the air freezing around him. He mechanically followed the instruction, and signed the acceptance of the delivery, then let the door slip closed in front of the other man. The delivery guy rushed back to his van, while Will was standing motionless in the living room.

Paris...

The world seemed to stop for a few seconds.

Will's chest suddenly got filled with surprisingly pleasant warmth. His heart was beating violently against his ribcage, but all his limbs felt cold as if they were dragged through coarse ice. Cold, very cold, and jagged, and rough...

He only came back to his senses when his scar started to sharply hurt from the intense shivers of excitement and horror rushing through his body. Will unsteadily walked to his coffee table, and placed the box there, then tried to open it.

His heart was beating even wilder, while his fingers tore the paper open. He knew it... The gift was from Hannibal. No doubt about that. The box arrived from Paris...

Somehow, he'd always had the feeling that Doctor Lecter was in Europe. There was no clear reason for this suspicion, he just felt it.

And now he also felt that Hannibal sent him a body part. He knew the man well enough to know this.

Will's strongest guess was an ear, though he also considered some bones or an eye wrapped in nylon. That was what Hannibal had for him... The never-ending, always resurfacing nightmares made from unforgiving, dark vengeance... The shallow, mirthless pleasure of a sadist... The continuous torture...

Will doubled up with pain as acute pang stung into his abdomen, and for a while, he couldn't continue unpacking the box. He was not sure about the origin of the sudden pain burning him from the inside and eating its way through the irregular tissues of his scar, but he suspected that it must have had something to do with his excessive drinking. His doctors warned him umpteen times that he would have to keep a very strict, healthy diet.

Will collapsed on the coffee table, drawing agonized, deep breaths, as coarse as sobs.

The pain had lasted at least for ten minutes before it decreased, and he could return to the unpacking of the gift.

It was a carved, dark, wooden box with refined, soft patterns covering its sides as a mysterious spider-web.

Will's hands couldn't stop shaking as he found the locking clasp, and snapped it open. He could almost feel the smell of decaying blood in his nostrils; his eyes were ready to accept the appearance of cut meat and skin...

But when the box opened, sheer astonishment hit him. There was no mutilated body part in it. The carved wooden box contained a miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower made of blue

sapphire crystals.

Obsessions

Hannibal dreamt about Will receiving the gift he had sent. Will was standing in his living room, front door half open, opaque crystals of snow dancing on a small patch of the dark floor, dogs lying lazily around his ankles... And as Will unwrapped the box, blood started to run from underneath the lid, and his trembling hands became covered with red streaks...

When the doctor woke up, he found that it was strangely hard to breathe. This was the most beautiful dream he had ever had. It was pure and simple, and meaningful like poetry... For a moment, he simply didn't want to accept that what he had just seen disappeared into nothing.

After a long minute of lying motionless, he sat up on the bed, since he decided that today, it was high time that he truly sent Will the box with the ear. He had taken his time the whole week, considering what kind of person would be the most appropriate victim to provide the ear for the gift. He had killed a few, but then realized that they had not been entirely perfect, and continued his search. He'd needed a week and five victims, but he could not choose the perfect ear to send. Now he made up his mind.

Therefore, he got up, and walked up to the mini-freezer standing in the corner of their hotel suite. The function of the freezer was to create ice cubes for their cold drinks, and Hannibal also kept his collection of ears in it. He took the chosen one packed in nylon, and then returned to their bed.

"Where is the box?"

Bedelia woke up to the menacing, yet unnaturally calm question breaking the silence of their room early in the morning. She turned to see what was going on.

Hannibal was standing in front of his night stand, keeping the tip of his long, white fingers on the wooden edge of the open top drawer.

"Where is Will's box?" the doctor repeated the question with the exact same intonation.

Bedelia sat up on the bed, asking in a sleepy whisper, "Are you sure it's not in your suit case?"

"I am. I put it in the top drawer of my night stand a week ago and haven't removed it since." Doctor Lecter was not the one to show clear emotions, but the corner of his mouth was tense now; an overt sign of his strong displeasure. "Have you touched it?"

"Do you think I'd steal your box?" Doctor Du Maurier adjusted the neck-line of her black satin nightdress with a half-hearted press of her left palm.

"It was not mine. It was *his*."

“But do you suppose I need it for any purpose?”

The feeble morning lights were glittering on the polished surface of the night stand as Hannibal placed a nylon-wrapped ear on it with an indignant push.

He kept a long pause before answering, “I don’t see any reason for that, no.”

“Then why ask if I had anything to do with its disappearance?”

There was a hint of distrust in Doctor Lecter’s dark brown eyes, but it soon disappeared. “I’ll ask the hotel personnel,” he said briefly.

Bedelia guessed that if there was any member of the hotel staff who might be suspected of thievery, that unfortunate person was about to end up in pieces. At least, the eerily calm expression on Hannibal’s face was hinting at that direction.

“You can always buy a new one,” she told him patiently.

“That one was perfect.”

Doctor Du Maurier saw that she wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep again, so she started to search for her clothes in the cabinet. While selecting a dress, she passed a remark, “Maybe, the idea of sending an ear to him was a bit crude, anyway. It wouldn’t suit a sophisticated man like you.”

Hannibal was about to make a motion to lift the ear from the night stand, but now his fingers froze. He didn’t respond.

“Sending an ear to him shows nothing of your fine artfulness. It’s too gory, predictable, and blatant,” Bedelia continued. “Perhaps, you could send him a letter instead.”

“A letter?” The question was threateningly cold.

“A letter,” she repeated with equanimity.

“I won’t write any of my thoughts to him. I was there to share my whole world with him, and he chose to push it away,” Hannibal’s voice turned bitter. “I won’t write him letters; it would make me look as if I were still obsessing over him from the distance.”

Doctor Du Maurier managed to suppress the first reply that came to mind. Hannibal was apparently in bad mood because of the disappearance of Will’s box, and she didn’t want to make it worse. “A postcard, then?” she asked instead. “Without any message included?”

Hannibal’s face slowly turned a bit less averse. He walked up to the woman, put his slim fingers under her chin, and then placed a brief kiss on her lips.

And this was when Bedelia realized that she gave the worst idea ever. Now she was going to spend her next days in gift shops, checking thousands of postcards and listening to Doctor Lecter’s disdainful remarks why none of them met his criteria.

Jack Crawford arrived home quite late again.

He had spent his day organizing a raid on an underground laboratory developing deadly viruses, the leading professor of which had been long investigated by the FBI. Jack had been the one to draw up the professor's profile in order to predict the terrorist cell's next movements, and now he got the task of planning the intervention.

When he sank onto the chair in front of his desk, Caroline123's message was waiting for him on his palmtop. "*Did you get my gift, Will?*"

Jack was tired enough after spending half of his day drowning in endless debates with the group of agents sent by the Counterterrorism Division to assist him with the maneuvers, and now this tricky question...

How on earth could he know whether Will had received the gift or not? Will hadn't reported it; that was for sure.

He massaged his temple, and tried to concentrate. What if Caroline hadn't sent a thing, and she was just playing a stupid game? Should he deny getting anything?

But what if she had truly sent a gift? Wouldn't it be much more useful to make her talk about it? And if this was really Hannibal, then he had surely sent *something*...

Finally, Jack typed a brief, "*Yes*," as a reply.

Caroline responded promptly, "*I'm glad you did. What does its color remind you of?*"

Awkward. Jack rubbed his forehead again with a careworn motion. What could he say?

He felt that if he gave a fictional reply, Caroline – or Lecter?! – was instantly going to figure out that he had no idea about the nature of the gift and he wasn't Will. But since he didn't have the faintest idea about what Will's gift looked like, he didn't dare start guessing the color of it.

"*It reminds me of one of my childhood memories. But it's a long story.*" Jack hoped that his response was skillful enough. He added to the message, "*I'm tired, I'll go to sleep now. I'll tell you about it tomorrow.*"

Caroline gave no answer.

Crawford spent an hour in front of his palmtop, going over some work-related documents and waiting for her to write, but she didn't. After he saw that there was no use hoping that she was going to say something, he closed the palmtop with a grumpy push.

He knew that his reply was only good for gaining him a day before he would have to write something concrete about Will's gift. In the meantime, somehow, he would have to figure out what it was.

Crawford found Will's front door unlocked again, so he simply just walked inside when he arrived at the younger man's house. Jack kept a paper bag of groceries in one hand, while with the other, he closed the door behind his back.

He spotted Will on the couch. The younger man was drinking something – supposedly alcohol – from a bottle, and was watching a city guide DVD about Paris. He kept his fogged eyes dreamily on the scene where a traditional macaron shop was being introduced to the viewers.

"I didn't know you were interested in French culture," Crawford broke the silence.

Will's limp body stirred. The younger man turned his eyes away from the TV screen with difficulty as if waking up from a profound sleep. When he saw his visitor, he dragged himself up into a sitting position, grabbing the armrest of the sofa with one hand, while hugging his abdomen with the other arm. A painful wince crossed his face as he straightened his back. "Jack..." He emitted a gruff hack. "What are you doing here?"

"You look horrible," the older man commented bluntly. "I brought you lunch. You are gaunt like a skeleton, you need to eat."

"Are you considering switching careers and starting out as a social worker?" Will asked with a weak, scornful half-smile - basically just a bitter pull at the left corner of his mouth.

"Do you think this is something to joke about?" Jack set a loaf of bread, a pack of spaghetti, and a bottle of tomato sauce on the coffee table from the paper bag. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life behind closed shutters, in the gloom, drinking to the point of unconsciousness?"

Shakily rubbing his palm across his t-shirt, over the hidden laceration crossing his abdomen, Will gave a quiet reply, "It sounds much better than all the other options I can think of right now."

Jack wanted to swiftly respond with a shrewd retort, but he realized he couldn't figure out any. He just cleared his throat, then threw a bundle of vegetables next to the noodles and sauce.

"Did nothing interesting happen to you in the past few days?" he asked while freeing a small pack of dried oregano from the bottom of the paper bag.

"Not really." Will's voice remained as coarse and disenchanted as before, but an unwitting twitch of his eyebrows showed that he was thinking of something he didn't want to mention.

"Nothing at all?" Jack asked again.

Will shrugged.

The older man finished unpacking the food he brought. “Okay, now get up from the damned couch, and make us pasta for lunch,” he ordered assertively.

Will just made a grimace and didn’t move first, but when Jack gave him the strictest look he had developed during his years at the FBI, Will finally turned towards the food, and got on his feet.

“You’d make a nightmarish helper, I hope you realize that,” the younger man muttered, while staggering with the vegetables and the spaghetti towards the kitchen.

Will blanched, peeled and chopped a couple of tomatoes. He spent a few seconds doubting that he would be able to finish the process without mutilating his fingers, his movements were that unstable after a bottle of cheap red wine, but he somehow managed to solve it without any significant kitchen accident.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Jack go over his things in the living room. The FBI agent was searching for something. It was no disappointment for Will to realize that the main reason Crawford visited him was that the older man wanted to find something among his personal belongings. Will didn’t even bother to mention that he saw right through Crawford’s clumsy attempts to hide his purpose, pretending that he was just checking whether Will needed anything from the shopping centre he planned to visit in the afternoon.

“Would you like me to change the light bulb in your floor lamp?” Crawford asked when he realized that Will was watching him.

“No, thanks.” Will turned to the simmering tomato sauce, stirred it a few times, and then added the fresh tomato slices and the oregano.

“Your home looks like a haunted house, with half of the bulbs burned out.”

Will ignored the comment, and concentrated on the food he was preparing.

“Would you timely inform me if he contacted you?” Jack’s next question was unexpected and much harsher than his previous words. He was looking straight at Will now.

The younger man put a lid on the saucepan, and slowly turned towards Crawford. “What do you think?” he asked with a lopsided, stiff half-smile.

“I don’t know what to think about you two anymore. You are apparently obsessing over him.”

“Am I?”

Jack took a few steps in the younger man’s direction. “Look, I see that this is not easy,” he started, his face grave. “It’s not easy for you, and trust me, it’s not easy for me either. I’m just recovering from the loss of my love, my dear Bella, the woman I spent half of my life with. Sometimes, I’m just sitting home alone in the evening, looking at the furniture we bought

together, listening to the music we chose together, thinking about her... About our memories, about the chances that were taken away from us... I understand how hard it is to let go."

"I've already let go of him."

"The hell you have!" With a scornful snort, Jack came to a halt at the entrance of the kitchen.

"I have." Will's voice was full of weary disillusionment, yet, his answer was resolute. "If I hadn't, I wouldn't spend my days here like this. I would cross the whole world or do anything else to find him."

The older man just made an impatient whisk with his left hand. "Alright, then look me in the eye and tell me that you genuinely despise him for who he is and what he has done to you!"

Will's tottering movements to adjust the saucepan on the stove suddenly stilled, and the pale blue of his eyes turned bleary.

Long silence followed Jack's sentence.

Finally, Will's words came in a raspy, tremulous sigh, "It's in the bedroom, on my night stand."

Blue

Late in the evening, Jack sat down in front of his palmtop, and set the mini Eiffel Tower in an evidence bag onto his desk. Will had given it to him with a lifeless shrug and no resistance, when the older man had stated that the strange gift was to be processed in the crime lab. The total lack of vigor in Graham's eyes had been close to scary.

Crawford switched the screen to Caroline123's page on International Love. He wrote her, "*I keep your gift on my night stand. It reminds me of the port where my first home was. The water was often deep blue before storm.*"

Caroline took a while before she texted back. Jack almost got up and went to sleep, but then the message suddenly popped up, "*Why did you call this a long story yesterday?*"

Crawford let out an angry puff. To hell with this woman! He forgot about the stupid excuse he had made last night, but Caroline didn't.

He typed an annoyed answer, "*Because I wanted to tell you some more about it. About the places I grew up, I mean. But I don't feel like sharing it with you any longer. I don't like the undertone of your question.*"

Caroline simply wrote, "*Why?*"

"*Because you seem to imply that I was telling you lies.*"

Jack thought he had managed to fake righteous indignation, and avert the veil falling off of his trick... Right until Caroline gave her response, "*Which is exactly what you were doing.*"

This was the point where Crawford lost patience with her, and quickly sent her the message, "*Don't try to look so assured. You know nothing about me!*"

Caroline didn't reply instantly. Jack had enough time to believe that this time he managed to give a witty response which made her reconsider her previous viewpoint, but then her answer arrived. "*That might be true. For example, I didn't know, Will, that you were this self-conceited and unable to subtly cope with situations where a woman outsmarted you.*"

Hannibal looked up from the forty-two postcards he had bought and was meticulously inspecting under a magnifying glass in order to select the proper one. Now, he kept his dark eyes on Bedelia. He was sitting in the corner of their room, in an armchair, while she was lying on their double bed, reading and writing messages on her iPad. Doctor Lecter suddenly remarked, "The man you are talking to must be special."

Bedelia stopped typing, and lifted her head up with a questioning look, "What makes you say that?"

“You were smiling. This was the first time I’d seen you smile when talking to someone online.”

The badly repressed surprise on Doctor Du Maurier’s face showed Hannibal that she didn’t realize her own reaction, and her former colleague’s words caught her off guard.

“It’s not what you think...” she tried to explain, but Doctor Lecter interrupted her.

“You really should not feel the need to apologize,” he said. “I understand that my company has been lacking the sources of entertainment lately. I don’t mind at all that you enjoy talking to him.”

“It’s not...” Bedelia started again, but Hannibal got up from his armchair, stepped next to her, and silenced her with a gentle caress of his fingertips on her lower lip.

“You don’t need to explain,” he murmured. “I saw it in your eyes.”

Doctor Du Maurier must have decided that it was more comfortable not to force the topic, because she subsided into silence for a while.

After finishing the message she typed, Bedelia chose to start a conversation with Hannibal about his favorite topic - basically the only topic he paid any attention to. Doctor Lecter was going through his postcards for the ninth time, and she decided that he needed some distraction before he would start the tenth round. “Tell me what hurts you the most about Will’s betrayal,” she asked.

Hannibal looked up from the postcard he was just examining.

“The feeling of powerlessness,” he gave a quiet reply after a couple of seconds. He got up from the armchair, and took a few steps towards the middle of the room, hands now folded behind his back. “What more could I have done to make him choose me? I gave him everything I could. My world, my secrets, my trust, my viewpoint, my future... And he stabbed me in the back. He simply didn’t want me... He chose them over me. *Them*! They didn’t do anything valuable for him, and gave him nothing. And he chose them.”

“I don’t think this was about him choosing someone else over you,” Bedelia disagreed with him. “He chose the moral principles he believed in. That’s a whole other question.”

“Does that make any difference?” Hannibal’s voice turned deeper and more pained in tone. “The result is the same. I gave him everything I was, and it was not enough.”

Bedelia let out a silent sigh. “I told you before: this was a paradox, you wanting to have him as a true friend...”

“But I do.” Hannibal turned back to look Doctor Du Maurier in the eye. “And now I can’t decide if I want to push a blade into him, and twist it, and drag it, and push it into him again... Or if I want to hold him close in an embrace and hear him breathing.”

Bedelia offered a faint smile. “You still love him, don’t you?”

The muscles in Hannibal’s jaw became somewhat taut; however, he admitted, “Yes, I do.”

“But I’m not talking about friendly love.”

The tension on Hannibal’s face increased, and his brown eyes darted at Bedelia with frightening intensity. “What are you talking about, then?”

Doctor Du Maurier sat up on the bed, maintaining eye contact. She didn’t reply, but the prolonged silence was enough to fill the room with a freezing aura as Doctor Lecter understood her implication.

“No.” The word left Hannibal’s lips in a short, perturbed breath. Bedelia saw that her suggestion had hit a nerve.

“Have you never considered this aspect?” she asked.

“No.” Doctor Lecter swiftly turned away from her to look out the hotel window. “And I’d prefer you not to do it either.”

Bedelia pretended not to hear the last sentence. “I think this is the answer to your question – what more you could have given him,” she continued talking pensively. “You either let him too close... or you didn’t let him close enough. You could have given him a chance to be yours, and yourself to be his... You could have shared this part of your life with him, and it would have meant that you could have had everything with him. You could have shown - not just in a twisted mental way - but also in a plain and way clearer physical way how much you cared. You two could have built a much stronger connection together, if you...”

“Would you stop this, please?” Hannibal interrupted with sudden quickness. Bedelia had never seen the man’s face this unnaturally pale before, as he was staring out the window. “Even if you were right, there would be no use talking about never existing chances. The past is the past. Sooner or later, I’d have left him behind like I’ve left everything else behind so many times in my life,” Doctor Lecter uttered in a cold, but speedy whisper. “And now I would like to ask you not to mention this particular topic again. Ever.”

The emphasis on the word ‘ever’ sounded like a serious threat, so Doctor Du Maurier decided that she shouldn’t press the love aspect of Hannibal and Will’s relationship if she wanted to make sure that she lived longer than a couple of more minutes.

“As you wish,” she nodded.

“I don’t want to talk about him at all today.” Hannibal abruptly stepped away from the window to have a look at his appearance in the mirror on the hotel room’s wall. He adjusted his tie, then put his suit jacket on. “I’m going out for a walk. These postcards are all worthless, I need to buy a new one.”

As Doctor Lecter left with firm steps, Bedelia leaned back on the bed, and tapped the screen of her iPad ponderingly.

Jack woke up early in the morning, to the electronic beeping of his alarm clock. He silenced it with a sleepy push, then get up from the bed. The first thing he did was search for his palmtop on his desk.

Last night he simply left the conversation after Caroline's derisive comment, without saying a thing. But now, as the first rush of anger had been alleviated by his sleep, he was curious whether she had written anything else throughout the night.

He opened his palmtop to see that Caroline123 sent him a message indeed.

"*I miss you, Will.*"

Jack felt his heart skip a beat. *I miss you*?! It was him! It was Hannibal! It had been Hannibal all along...

He could barely believe his eyes. He did it. He truly caught Lecter's attention with his idea. What a victory! Caroline was Lecter, and he walked right into the trap...

Jack eagerly re-read the short message.

If this was really Hannibal – and now, after this sentence, the possibility seemed almost one hundred percent sure -, then finally, the conversation took an important turn. Even though, Crawford didn't expect such a simple and genuine statement from Hannibal. But, well, Lecter always had the ability to surprise everyone.

Hands shaking from excitement, Jack rapidly wrote, "*I miss you too.*"

Only after sending the message, he started to realize how this must have looked if this Caroline wasn't Hannibal but a real woman searching for a lover. In that case, he made Will look like a fool, sending *I-miss-you*-s to strangers... But, okay, this was not a big deal. The worst that could happen was that he was encouraging a lunatic and made her believe that Will had some absurd emotions for her from the distance. But if this was Lecter – and sure he was! –, this was the best chance to disclose the truth.

Jack started to impatiently organize some documents on his desk while waiting for Caroline123 to answer. He hoped that he wouldn't have to wait until he had to leave for work. He was simply unable to focus on anything else now but his plan. It worked... It really worked... He was going to catch Lecter... Nothing could stop him now. Nothing.

But Caroline's reply made the papers fall out of his hand in a chaotic jumble onto the floor.

She wrote, "*Do you still remember the taste of our first kiss?*"

Kisses

Jack spent a few seconds staring at the screen of his palmtop. Will and Hannibal? Kissing?! And not just once, but at least a few times, if now Hannibal was talking about a *first* kiss...

It was not that he had any problem with same-sex relationships. But already the fact that Will and Hannibal were close friends was unsettling enough, and bad enough to imagine what those two sick minds were doing together... And now the possibility of a more intimate depth added to the picture... It was plain disturbing.

And it completely changed the situation.

Crawford paid no attention to the fallen papers, and not even to the fact that his working hours were about to start in no time. He quickly finished the steps of his morning routine, and then got in his car to visit Will.

Will opened the door only after the sixth ring of the doorbell. Crawford remarked inwardly that the morning lights made Graham look even worse. At least, the gloomy shadows of the house graciously hid some of his unkemptness and unhealthy pallor. Jack decided not to try to guess how long Will hadn't shaved, or changed his clothes.

"How are you?" The older man risked the question.

"I'm fine." Even a person under a death sentence waiting for his execution would have uttered these words with more enthusiasm. Will took an uncertain step back, probably for he realized that Jack was making a mild grimace because of the heavy smell of alcohol and uncleanness welling from his direction.

"What do you want?" Will rasped.

Crawford entered the room without invitation, and closed the door. "I'd like to ask you about you and Hannibal Lecter."

"Yes?"

"Is there any chance that your relationship was a bit more... uhm... personal than the one you told me about?"

"More *personal*?" Will's eyes were fixed on the doorknob beside Jack's elbow. "Yes, it was pretty *personal* if that's what you want to hear... He was my friend, my doctor, my enemy, my support, my undoing... The only person I've ever truly trusted at some point... And he showed me what true friendship was... He did... in spite of everything..." Will's voice trailed off. The muddled words were enough to convince Crawford that Graham had gotten heavily drunk again.

And since the answer was too vague, Jack saw that he was not able to avoid a direct question. “But was he more than just a friend?”

The corner of Will’s mouth made a sharp, jerking movement. “Like what?”

“Like your lover.”

Will’s blue eyes flashed from the door to the older man in a bewildered gaze. He seemed to sober up in a second. “What the hell? No!”

The genuine astonishment aroused Jack’s suspicion that he might be making a fool out of himself. “Er, okay,” he mumbled. “I was just...”

“What were you thinking?!” Will’s voice went from shocked to angry. “Do you suppose I would get involved in an affair with a serial killer?!” He pushed his fingers edgily into the tangled curls of his brown hair. “I’m not even interested in *men*.”

“Okay, I see, I was just... asking.”

“It’s very upsetting that you felt that it was necessary to ask this at all!”

“I see, I see... It’s just... You were so close together, and I started wondering...”

“Not *this* close.” Will shook his head impatiently.

“Okay, but...” Crawford took a deep breath, and then continued, “But did you share two or three kisses, a couple of times? Just for fun, perhaps. Open mouth, real kisses...”

“Like some adventurous teenagers?” Will uttered a coarse snicker. “What’s this all about, Jack? This is complete nonsense. We didn’t even give a peck on each other’s cheeks.”

Crawford decided to make a last attempt. “Is it possible that for some reason he believes that he kissed you?”

“No.”

“Maybe, you just don’t remember clearly. He might have kissed you in a non-consensual way, while you were under the influence of hallucinations and illness... before your hospitalization...”

“Jack! He is a manipulative, cannibalistic serial killer. He force-fed me a raw ear while I was suffering from an episode, not *kissed* me! What on earth is the purpose of your questions?”

This was the moment when Crawford truly saw that he had indeed made a fool out of himself. *Damned Caroline...*

“I’m really sorry, Will,” he muttered after an awkward minute of silence. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you. It’s just... I have to see every detail of this case if I ever want to catch him. Er, thanks for your cooperation.” The FBI Agent took a step towards the door in order to leave as soon as possible.

Will stared at him intently. “But what’s with the kissing?”

“I had a reason to believe that he’d kissed you. But... but I’m sure now that it was just a misunderstanding. I’m sorry, I’m not allowed to share any details of an ongoing investigation.” And Jack quickly rushed out the door.

Hannibal hadn’t believed that the way he had been missing Will could worsen. At first, he had actually hoped that it was about to weaken with every day spent thousands of miles away from his former friend. After the fourth or fifth month, he started to accept that it wouldn’t get any better. But the fact that it was going to get a lot worse... Well, this was really not fair. And it was all Doctor Du Maurier’s fault.

How could she invent the surrealistic idea about him being in love with Will? And why? Why couldn’t she just kept quiet about it? Was it really necessary to share this with him?

Hannibal set the postcard aside he was examining on the shop counter, and turned towards the next one. He tried hard not to let his mind return to Bedelia’s suggestion, but it was impossible not to think about it. And think about it again, and again, and continue thinking about it...

Thinking about a chance that might have been able to give him Will and the life he wanted to live with him... This was like venom, eating him from the inside, poisoning every breath, every heartbeat, and every thought.

Up until this moment, he had tried to tell himself that he had done his best to make Will see the beauty and happiness he’d wanted to show him, and Will had been blind to it, and it simply hadn’t worked, and it was time to ultimately give up on him, and Will was just an annoying failure of his plans... And he hoped that sooner or later, he would also realize this in his heart, not just rationally. But now, after Bedelia’s words about love...

This opened a new aspect, but he wished it hadn’t.

Did he really love Will? Like lovers do? Or was it just Doctor Du Maurier’s dubious idea? Was it possible at all that he was indeed in love with Will?

He had long ago had to admit to himself that he was capable of loving Will in a way he had never been able to love others... But it was friendly love, wasn’t it? Surely, it was. What else could it be?

Of course it was. This was all just Bedelia’s trick, and he shouldn’t even consider it... This was some cheap mind game. A see-through, overt attempt to twist his perception... Too unreasonable, too absurd, impossible... He shouldn’t care, he shouldn’t pay any attention, he should simply just shrug it off...

But he couldn’t. And he felt that this was becoming the worst torture possible.

Will found Jack's questions about the kiss laughable first. It was even in a sense disgraceful, thinking about a man like Doctor Lecter kissing his half-patient-half-friend as if it was some childish experiment for fun... What a bizarre idea. Hannibal was attracted to beauty and perfection, not to '*anything* he hadn't tried before'.

Will shook his head, and groped for the bottle of liquor standing on the floor, next to the coffee table. He took a big gulp, and tried not to think about the topic any longer. Instead, he struggled to recall when the last time was he had fed his dogs. Was it possible that they had to skip last dinner and this breakfast too?

Will couldn't remember, but he guessed they would be way more anxious if they hadn't gotten anything yet, and they wouldn't just peacefully snooze in the corner. Therefore, he drank some more, and lied back down on the couch.

With a shaky sway of the remote control, he switched the TV on, and started watching his DVD again.

Hannibal kissing him... Such an absurd idea. Where the hell could Jack get this from? *No, no, don't go back to the kissing-theory again*... Will scratched his beard, and tried to focus on the film. He soon managed to get absorbed in the details.

But then the increasing amount of vodka in his system and the forty-second time he had been watching the city guide DVD started to play tricks on his brain. There was a scene in the film where a couple was sitting on a bench on the side of the Seine, gazing at the water and then kissing.

And Will couldn't stop his mind from starting to imagine how it would feel to sit there with Hannibal. The light touch of warm breeze on his cheeks, the silvery glimmer of sunshine on the water, the distinctive scent of the doctor's expensive cologne... And then a moist, soft pressure on his lips.

No.

This is stupid... This is simply insane. Will buried his face in his palms. *How on earth could Jack invent this nonsense?*

Was it possible that Hannibal had truly kissed him while he had been lost in a hallucination?

No, no, this was absurd...

But what if...?

No. It was impossible. Absolutely impossible.

But there were still hours of ill seizures he couldn't recall... Those were a blur. A faded fog in his mind. Maybe...

No. It couldn't happen. It had never happened. Not even once. Never...

But maybe...

No.

The rational part of Will's mind knew that it had never happened. He knew it, felt it, and he didn't have any real doubt about it.

And yet, he closed his eyes, and made a trembling motion to briefly rub his lips with his callous fingers, imagining for a moment that he was touching the place where Hannibal's mouth had been pressed a long while ago.

Crawford had been two hours late from work because of the short visit he had paid Will. The leader of the agents sent by the Counterterrorism Division blamed him for the delay of their schedule; he didn't even have time to drink coffee before they had to leave the office, and had forgotten his umbrella at home... Which meant that he got soaked in rain before he tugged the umbrella out of one of his subordinates hand and held it over his own head.

Jack couldn't have been angrier with Caroline123. Or Lecter. Yes, it was still probable that it was Hannibal Lecter. Though it might just be a foolish woman who fell in love with Will from the distance. Why would Hannibal write that rubbish question about the first kiss? Why would anyone write about a non-existent first kiss? The whole thing was only good to make Crawford look like an idiot as if he was clutching at straws, trying to make up absurd ideas to somehow, anyhow, track Doctor Lecter down.

He sincerely hoped that Will was drunk enough to soon forget about the whole conversation.

When he finally managed to get an hour of break back in his office, he sat down with his palmtop, and opened Caroline123's profile. He typed with quick, enraged strokes, "*Are you crazy? We have never kissed!*"

Caroline's reply was fast. "*I know. I just wanted you to think about kissing me. And I think it worked.*"

Jack felt the anger explode in him. "*You are sick.*"

Caroline gave no reply. After a minute of waiting, Jack closed the palmtop with an ill-tempered growl, and left his office to finally grab a cup of coffee.

But when he returned, and saw that Caroline still hadn't answered, he started to reconsider the whole case. He knew that Caroline was online, and the fact that she didn't reply meant that she didn't like his response. And the last thing Jack wanted was to truly break up the dialogue.

Okay, he told himself. *If this is really just a lunatic fan of Will, there is no point in spending time fuming over her tricks. And if this is Hannibal, then I should immediately pick up the conversation.*

Inhaling slowly, Jack counted till three, and then he wrote, "*Alright, sorry, maybe I was a bit too harsh. But I don't like that you are trying to manipulate me.*"

Caroline was indeed online, since she replied in no time. "*What would you like me to do, then? I'll do whatever you like.*"

A suspicion of a smile appeared on Jack's face. For a moment, he forgot about the fact that Caroline might very well be Hannibal, and felt some genuine amusement when reading her insinuating response, but it didn't last longer than a second. He soon realized that most probably, he was talking to Lecter. He quickly tried to figure out a useful answer.

"*Show me a picture about yourself*," he wrote. "*A normal picture, not like the blurred one you have on the site.*"

Caroline took a minute, before she sent, "*Does it really matter?*"

"*What?*"

"*How I look.*"

Here we go. Now she is trying to make up excuses why she doesn't show her appearance, Jack concluded. *Well, not she. He. This must be Hannibal.* He simply answered, "*It does.*"

"*I see. But you don't need photos. You know how I look.*"

And for Jack, this response was the absolute proof. Caroline was Lecter. He didn't have a single doubt about it anymore. Caroline123 had just admitted knowing Will in person... It must have been Hannibal then. And it was time to develop a plan to catch him.

Writing

Jack spent some time wondering what he should ask from Hannibal in order to help the overseas authorities find him.

So far, the FBI hadn't been able to track down the forwarding company that delivered the mini Eiffel Tower to Graham. Will had claimed to have thrown the packaging paper of the gift and the attached delivery documents into the flames of his fireplace right after receiving the box, and to have forgotten about the fact – in a quite intoxicated state – that those might be important for criminal investigation. Crawford had some mild doubts about this statement, but he hadn't called it into question openly. He had seen it on Will's face that the younger man was going to stick to this story, no matter what, and, except an unproved gut feeling, Jack had no reason to be skeptical about it.

He ordered two lab technicians to check the security footage of the gas stations and tollgates closest to Will's home, hoping that the delivery vehicle might have been recorded and might have some logos on, which could make it easier to trace it back to the company handling the transaction. But they hadn't been able to find the motor vehicle yet.

And even if Jack was able to pinpoint the exact address where Hannibal had sent the Eiffel Tower from, probably it wouldn't help much. It was highly unlikely that Lecter was still staying at the same place.

Crawford decided that he should coax Hannibal to taking the risk of sending something again. Doctor Lecter should go to a post office, where the security cameras would record him, and then the overseas police might be able to locate him.

After some deliberations, Jack wrote Caroline123, "*If you won't send me a picture, then I want you to send me a letter. A real letter; by post.*"

"*Alright.*" That was Caroline's only response.

Jack added, "*And I want you to tell me when you are going to send it. The exact date and time.*"

Caroline suddenly stopped answering, and Crawford started to suspect that she didn't like his request. She wrote only after a long pause, "*Could you keep this bossy style at bay, please? I'm not one of your terrified subordinates.*"

Jack gulped hard when seeing her reply. For a moment, the notion crossed his mind that maybe, somehow, Caroline123 knew exactly whom she was talking to. But that was simply impossible, wasn't it? There was no way she could find out about it. No. It must have been just a coincidence that Caroline had mentioned workplace hierarchy. Well, not Caroline. It was Hannibal Lecter. Crawford still had some difficulties with switching the beautiful, elegant blonde's secretive picture to Lecter's face in his head.

"*I don't have subordinates*," Jack answered with a few ill-tempered hits on the keyboard. "*I used to work as a teacher at an academy, as you might probably know. And I also took some smaller marine engineering jobs earlier, but nothing with subordinates. Stop mocking me.*"

"*As you wish.*" Caroline wrote swiftly. "*But, by the way, you still haven't stopped giving me orders.*"

Bedelia started to feel bad about the remark she made about Hannibal and Will, and the never-fulfilled possibility of them being a couple. She saw that, with this comment, she hurt Hannibal more than with anything else she could have said or done.

Now Doctor Lecter spent his time in the lounge of their new hotel, leaving his freshly bought postcards in their room as if he was unable to pay any more attention to them. He hadn't said a word to Doctor Du Maurier after their last conversation.

When Bedelia finally decided to have a talk with him, she found him sitting alone by a long, curtain-framed window, looking at the small Florentine boutiques lining up behind the hotel. Hannibal's lips were sallow, face as livid and lifeless as if he were suffering from a painful, yet invisible deadly illness.

Bedelia sat down beside him, and took one of his hands in her soft palms. "I didn't mean to hurt you like this," she whispered.

"Did you suppose that your words would help?"

"In a way, yes. You said it yourself that you were unable to let go of this..."

"And how exactly did that give you the impression that you should make it even more difficult for me?"

Bedelia didn't reply to the dry question. "... And I said you should stop lying to yourself," she continued. "If you ever want to heal, the first thing you should let go is the denial you live in. No matter how hard it is, you have to face the truth."

"Which is?"

"Which is the fact that you love Will."

Hannibal closed his eyes for a few seconds as if he was letting the words linger on his mind before he gave his reply, "I've never denied loving him."

"You have. Just not in the usual sense."

"I've always loved him as my only friend." Doctor Lecter's long, cold fingers became stiff in Bedelia's hands. However, he continued talking in a detached tone, "I still do. But if you want to make up unreal theories about how this feeling is more than an earnest wish to have a true friend by my side, I'd prefer you not to waste our time with it."

“You refuse to see my point.”

“I don’t see any point in creating false ideas about my feelings for Will.”

Doctor Du Maurier leaned closer to him. Her words were quiet, yet perfectly audible. “Instead of locking him in a hospital cell, playing games with his illness, or killing his surrogate daughter in front of his eyes, you should have showed him your *love*. And if you had admitted this timely to yourself, now you would have him, and everything you ever wanted to have with him. But you wanted to balance between the usual tricks that always helped you along your life, and the novelty of the situation you experienced when starting to care for him... You can’t have both. You can’t have a tortured mind lost among your well-played mind tricks and, at the same time, the genuine reciprocation of your feelings... You chose the first one.”

Hannibal still hadn’t looked at her, just kept his eyes on the Florentine street view. The lonely figure of a shop owner was working in the distance on cleaning his window with a tattered mop.

“It was a mistake, I accept it.” Doctor Lecter’s voice remained aloof. “I made mistakes, and it’s not just his, but my fault too that I lost him.” He kept a measured pause. “But you are wrong about one thing: I did show him my love. I wanted to make him happy. No matter what you think, that was my basic intention. I wanted to fill his days with beauty. I wanted him to live the meaningful life he has always deserved, full of miracles and exquisiteness; unusual, but beautiful like he is.”

Doctor Du Maurier shook her head. “You wanted to show him beauty, but that beauty only exists in *your* mind. He is not you. He might understand you more than average people do, he might see more of your truth than anyone else can, but he is not *you*. And you should’ve respected this more. I think you could’ve learned how to do this in a relationship based on physical love. He would have been able to teach you. But you didn’t take this step, and your contorted friendship was not enough to blind him to the horrors of your ways. That’s the truth.”

All of a sudden, Hannibal was facing her; his cold, reptile-like eyes glaring with a sudden emotion impossible to subdue. Bedelia instinctively moved a few inches backwards on her chair. For a second, she was almost sure that the man was going to attempt to kill her.

But, finally, Hannibal just leaned to her, pulled her in his arms, and then put his face to the silky skin of her right cheek. “You are not helping.” His words came in soft, resigned syllables. “You are just torturing me with your words.”

Bedelia slipped her arms around Doctor Lecter’s shoulders. “I’m trying to help you,” she uttered in a single breath. “Trust me.”

Hannibal became motionless for a while, probably still under the influence of Doctor Du Maurier’s words. Then he started kissing her neck.

“Let’s go upstairs, shall we?” he asked gently.

Will was dreaming.

He was very ill, and having a seizure. Blurred contours of furniture... Shadows... Then a sudden flash. Hands around his face, holding his head up... Darkness again.

Mild pressure of fingertips on his temple. He heard Hannibal speak, "Can you hear me? Will, Will..."

Hannibal... Oh, Hannibal...

The room was shaking in front of Will's eyes as he opened them. He was in Hannibal's office. For a moment, he could see it, and then the world turned into shadows again.

The next thing he felt was a mouth touching his. Soft, wet, uncertain... A tentative kiss.

And Hannibal whispered against Will's lips, "Please, don't ever leave me."

When Will woke up, his scar was aching violently, like a fresh stab into his stomach. Pressing his palms over the wound, he turned on his side, and buried his face in the greenish texture of his couch.

Hannibal was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. Bedelia got up to take a shower after the long and almost painstakingly refined sex they had just had.

She was the most perfect sex partner Hannibal had ever had, in spite of the lack of emotional attachment she showed. In fact, that was one of the main reasons she was so perfect. He didn't need anything more. Other people were talking about the beauty of the mixture of deep feelings and true passion, but Hannibal was one hundred percent sure that with his mindset, he would be unable to experience that, even if he wanted. And, anyway, he didn't want it at all. It was pleasant and convenient that Bedelia had the same lack of romantic ambitions about their sexual intercourses. It made everything secure and calculable.

Doctor Du Maurier turned back to Doctor Lecter from the bathroom door. "I think you should write him a letter," she said.

Hannibal felt a cold sting as he was dragged back to the thought of Will by her words. For a few seconds, he had managed to ponder over something else, but he had to realize that it couldn't last longer than a minute. He gave a lackluster reply, "No. I told you before that I wouldn't send him letters."

"I didn't say that you should send it too. But you should definitely write a letter addressed to him." She leaned against the door frame, and then made a slack motion with her left palm to adjust the unusually disheveled locks of her hair. "In a letter, you could express some emotions and ideas about him that might remain hidden among so many swirling thoughts

and feelings right now. Let me assume that you gave the advice numerous times to your patients: to write a letter for therapeutic purpose. That's what I suggest you now. Let your feelings grow into written words. It will help you a lot to see clearly."

The gloomy expression on Hannibal's face didn't melt away. He sat up on the bed and turned to put his shirt on as calmly as if he didn't hear his former colleague's suggestion. At first, his intention was to keep this up and truly pretend that Bedelia's words had no effect on him, but then he changed his mind with a slight frown appearing on his forehead.

"Solely out of respect for your expert opinion, I might give it a try," he said finally.

The Letter

When Bedelia gave Doctor Lecter the idea of writing a letter, she didn't think that the letter was going to be longer than a few paragraphs. But when she arrived at their hotel suite after having her nails and hair done in a salon, visiting a few showplaces, and taking a long walk, she found Hannibal sitting at the coffee table under the window and writing the ninth page.

Bedelia came to a halt not far from the table. "Are those papers all parts of Will's letter?" she asked, somewhat surprised.

"Yes," Hannibal replied while finishing a sentence with a neat, elegant stroke of the pen. "I've written him a bit about our journey."

Bedelia saw that the so-called 'bit' meant every step of their travel and each place they had visited. She put the question to him with some hesitation, "And is this the last page?"

"I don't think so. I've just started to explain the museums to him."

A sad look appeared on Doctor Du Maurier's face. "Why are you writing this much?"

"It somehow gives me the feeling as if he was here with me." A hint of a smile became visible in the corner of Doctor Lecter's pale lips. "I also plan to write about the souvenirs I would have liked to buy him. For instance, do you remember that small sapphire Eiffel Tower I showed you in a shop window and said I would have liked to give that to him if he had been there with me? I want to introduce that to him..."

"I don't think it's necessary," Bedelia interrupted a bit quicker than usual. "This is just a fictional letter, you don't need to describe every object we came across and you wanted to show him."

At first, Hannibal seemed declining, but then he put the pen down. Doctor Du Maurier sat down next to him in an armchair, and placed her palm on the man's elbow.

"Have you written about your feelings?" she asked.

Doctor Lecter made a slow motion to adjust the papers in an ordered pile. Finally, he admitted, "I haven't."

"It would have been the point of writing this letter."

"I know. But I prefer it this way."

At first, Doctor Du Maurier wanted to give an admonishing response, but then she couldn't suppress a faint smile as she accidentally spotted a sentence of Hannibal's letter and saw that Doctor Lecter had described even the color and the material of the carpet on the ground floor of the hotel where they had first stayed in Europe.

Will had had absolutely no idea what could make his dark, pointless days even worse than they had been, but after Jack's stupid questions about the kiss, he realized that the mystery had been solved. From that day, he found his life simply unbearable.

Before that, all he'd had to do was struggle with the burning wish to chase Hannibal. To follow Hannibal anywhere... Out of revenge. Out of sadness. Out of loneliness. Out of hatred. Out of any reason he could just think up. But Will knew that this would have only been good to give the doctor the interesting challenge of a new game. So he had fought all the pain, the urge, the despair, and locked himself in a torpid haze of drunkenness far away from Hannibal.

Now he also had to struggle with something even worse.

He was unable to fall asleep without seeing drunken, half-conscious dreams about kissing Doctor Lecter. Fingers pressing against his jaw, his mouth filled with another man's tongue, almost choking on an eager, uncontrollable kiss... And even while awake, he had to fight for breath, as if he had just been forcibly pulled away from lips which were desperately trying to explore his.

In some of his dreams, the kiss was initiated by Hannibal while Will was shaking from illness and hallucinations, and Doctor Lecter suddenly kissed him as an unplanned, yearning experiment. But oddly enough, in most of his dreams, Will was the one who dragged the doctor closer by his suit jacket, and started a fervent, open mouth kiss. Even in his dreams, Will didn't have any palatable reason to do so, he just kissed Hannibal because the mental connection between them became too strong, too overwhelming, and this was his way of expressing it.

And the damned dreams were not just clear and heavily stuck in his brain, but emotionally absorbing too.

Will hated this to a level he was almost unable to cope with. The idea of Hannibal's kiss was disgusting and nauseating. And it was, in a sense, thrilling, because it didn't just remind him of gore, blood, death, and self-loathing, but also made his heart flutter in his chest with excitement as if the kiss was something wonderful and extraordinary. But most of all, it was painful. It reminded him how tightly he was still connected to the monster who had ruined everything around him, killed the ones he cared for, and shattered his sanity... and made him feel loved for once in his life.

He wanted to simply erase the picture of the kiss from his head, but he couldn't. He didn't know why he couldn't stop thinking about it, but with every passing hour, it just grew more intense in his mind.

Maybe it was the unexpectedness and absurdity of the idea. Maybe it was the vague revenge of his tormented brain falling apart from the too much alcohol... Or maybe it was the endless loneliness filling his days.

Only one thing was for sure: it was slowly becoming the worst torture possible.

Caroline123 disappeared for a few days, and this span of time was enough for Crawford to become suspicious that she was up to something. That Hannibal was up to something. What about the letter Caroline promised? Would she send it? Okay, he...

Jack found it kind of ridiculous that he spent more time thinking about this Caroline than about the new project he had started working on in his office and which might have meant the saving of the life of twelve kidnapped victims.

Maybe he shouldn't be so obsessed with the capturing of Lecter, but he couldn't stop. After the death of his wife, his days seemed to have become empty, and he tried to spend as much time as possible with work. But he still had hours in the evening when he had nothing to do, and the only thing that could drag him out of numb melancholy was when Caroline contacted him. Well, when he tried to devise plans to catch Lecter.

And Friday evening, Caroline wrote a message again. "*I sent you the letter, Will.*"

What? Jack frowned with discontent at the screen of his palmtop. This was not what he asked her for...

Caroline added, "*Let me help you with the guessing. I sent it from Italy. Do you want me to give you a riddle about the city I sent it from?*"

Now she was mocking him again... Crawford answered edgily, "*No.*"

"*Why are you so cold?*"

"*Because you lied to me.*"

Caroline gave a simple reply, "*Did I?*"

"*You said you would tell me the exact date and time when you'd send the letter... before sending it.*"

"*I've never said that.*"

Jack couldn't remember the exact words of the previous conversation, and didn't feel like re-reading it, but he suspected that Caroline was telling the truth, and she indeed hadn't given a consenting reply to his last request. But he was nonetheless angry with her, and wrote her, "*You led me to believe that you would do that, and deceived me, anyway. That makes you a liar.*"

"*I'm not the only one who's telling lies.*"

Reading the short reply was the second time when Jack had the feeling that Caroline knew who he really was. But he still kept some hope alive, so he didn't want to throw his mask away. And, since he suspected that Will wouldn't restrict his manner, he wrote the first thing that came to mind, "*You are crazy.*"

Caroline answered, unperturbed, "*So are you, for trying to catch a serial killer through an online dating site. But I like your ingenuity.*"

Crawford emitted an irritated growl. Even the fact that Hannibal revealed his identity more clearly couldn't make him less displeased. He had enough of this woman's – Lecter's – wit. He simply wrote, "*Damn you.*"

And then pushed the palmtop aside.

Quickly rubbing his neck, he leaned back in his chair; his scar was aching. *Stop writing Caroline*, an inner voice whispered to him. *She – well, he – is just playing you... and knows everything. This is just an evil game. This can't end well...*

But it was too late to stop. He had Lecter's attention. He couldn't let a chance like this slip away.

Pulling the palmtop back in front of him, Crawford typed a new message. "*I can prove you that I'm not a liar and that I'm truly Will.*"

Caroline paused with surprise, and only answered after a minute, "*How?*"

"*I want to see you through a video call. And you will see me too.*"

"*Alright,*" Caroline replied without any further delay. "*We'll talk to each other tomorrow evening, according to your time-zone.*"

Caroline123's quick consent astonished Jack. He didn't really expect Hannibal to a give a solid proof of the fact that he was the one talking to 'Will'. Now it was time to show it. *Fine*.

Hopefully, and most probably, Lecter didn't have the technical apparatus to modify the pictures his camera showed, and the analysis of the online material might lead to some useful revelations about the place he was staying at. And even if Lecter was smart enough to choose a neutral background for the video call, he might slip interesting information when talking to his former friend.

The only thing Jack needed was to convince Will to cooperate.

Will had managed to memorize Hannibal's long letter word for word. He realized this only when he woke up in the morning, tried to recall a sentence the doctor had written about the Louvre, and suddenly could recite the whole paragraph with no difficulty. He acknowledged the fact that he knew the letter by heart with a sleepy, bitter growl.

Perhaps, he shouldn't have been reading it continuously for three days. He tried to stop, but whenever he put the papers aside, he instantly felt the need to check some details again. He told himself that the only reason he had paid this much attention to the text was that he had been trying to find clues about Hannibal's current whereabouts to help the FBI investigation.

But this was a very weak lie. He hadn't even reported to the authorities that he had received a letter.

After starting his day with a gulp of vodka, he grabbed the papers, which were placed on his night stand – always within reach, and began to re-read the orderly, smooth sentences with a tremulous pull at the corner of his mouth. Attached to the long letter, Hannibal had also sent him a blank postcard about a coastal village in Provence. Will placed the postcard next to the pages of the letter he was reading.

He could clearly hear the doctor's calm, mellow voice in his head, telling him all those details as if Hannibal was compiling a list for the background elements of one of his drawings. So mechanical and impartial... And yet, the meticulous accuracy and the tremendous amount of time spent writing the twelve-page-long letter showed something that wrung Will's heart.

He let his empathy pull him into the head of Doctor Lecter and make him feel as if he had been in Europe with Hannibal.

"One of Will's postcards is missing." Hannibal slowly cut a piece from the *carne al piatto* he had ordered for dinner, while shooting a cold glance at the woman sitting opposite him by the table of the restaurant.

"I thought you didn't need that one; it was put aside," Bedelia responded lightly. "I took it and sent it to one of my cousins."

Hannibal dipped the bite of meat in the seasoned olive oil. "It was the exact one I decided to send Will."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes."

An apologizing half-smile appeared on Bedelia's calm, oval face. "I'm sorry, I didn't know about your choice."

Hannibal turned to cut up the asparagus on the side of his plate. They spent a few minutes eating in silence.

And then, as Doctor Lecter took his glass of red wine to drink, Bedelia suddenly remarked, "I organized you a date."

The crystal glass froze in Doctor Lecter's hand before it could reach his lips. "Excuse me?"

"I organized you a date," she repeated, "With someone special."

Hannibal took a small gulp from the wine before answering, "I'm not interested."

“With Will Graham.”

Doctor Lecter’s eyes shifted in a flash from the stem of the crystal glass to Bedelia’s face. His features were stiff as a sculpture’s. “You’d better not make fun of my feelings for him.”

“This is not a joke. You are going to meet him online.”

The nearly invisible tinge of redness appearing on the pale skin over Hannibal’s distinct cheekbones elicited a small, contented smile from Bedelia.

The Video Call

“You’ll have to talk to him tomorrow.” Crawford was standing in the entrance of Will’s living room, holding his umbrella in one hand, shaking round rain drops from it on the doormat.

Will, who was fidgeting with the empty bottles around the coffee table, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, asked hoarsely, “To whom?”

“*Him.*”

Will’s eyes turned unhealthy bleary in a moment, and his face grew pale. “No.”

“He wants to talk to you online,” Jack explained as if it was a completely natural thing. “He contacted the FBI and requested a video call.”

For a second, there was silence, and then Will sank down onto the couch, pressing both palms on the scar across his stomach. “No,” he repeated.

“I hope you understand how important this is.”

“Please, no.”

Jack braced his umbrella against the doorframe, and then walked up to Will. He gave his reply while sitting down next to Graham on the sofa, “He might reveal something useful.”

Will’s whole body shook as if he had been punched by an invisible fist. “No,” he croaked the word again.

“I know that this is not easy for you.”

“Please, don’t do this to me.”

Jack sat at the side of Will without further speaking. The younger man restlessly dug his fingers into the clammy, matted curls of his hair, and hid his face behind his wrists. Crawford leaned back on the sofa, and watched one of the dogs lazily scratch the wall beneath the front window.

They spent a few minutes in complete silence. At last, Will lifted his head up, letting out a long, tormented exhalation.

“I’m... I’m not sure that I can do this,” he uttered in a low, hoarse voice.

“Of course you can.”

“It requires all my strength to keep myself away from him. I... I can’t take any more...”

Crawford shook his head impatiently. “Please don’t tell me that talking to him would damage the peaceful happiness of your wonderful days!”

Will hung his head again, and started rubbing his forehead with trembling palms. “Please...”

“This is killing you - this inactiveness,” Jack retorted. “You must do something. You have to fight. The life you chose after his escape has been totally wrecking you.”

“To fight... That’s what he wants. That is exactly what he wants,” Will muttered in front of himself in blurred, unstable words. “Me to follow him... To fight... To not let go of him... To fight... To never let go of him...”

Crawford interrupted Graham’s drunken jumble of sentences harshly, “He killed your loved ones! Who cares if this is his game too? We’ll win this, no matter what. And he will pay for everything he has done!”

Will emitted a guttural, choking sound, and continued rubbing his temple. He gave no reply.

Jack spent a while keeping his eyes on the dog which was stoutly working on peeling off a part of the wall cover. Eventually, the older man made an abrupt motion, smacking his palms down on his knees, and then got up from the couch.

“Can you promise me that you won’t drink before the conversation?” he asked sternly.

Will didn’t answer.

Jack added, “And at least brush your hair or something. I don’t want him to believe that you’ve been living on the streets for months.”

“This is not like a real date,” Hannibal murmured, while he adjusted his necktie for the umpteenth time.

“Are you sure about it?” Bedelia asked. She had been reading a French novel, but now she put the book aside and turned to look at her former colleague, who was standing in front of the huge mirror in their bathroom.

“Yes,” Hannibal responded promptly.

“This is the first time you will speak to him after I confronted you with the true nature of your feelings for him.”

Hannibal pulled the rosebud out of the pocket of his suit jacket, and switched it for a deep red handkerchief. For a while, he rested his long, slim fingers over the fabric with relaxed content, but then he changed his mind and removed the handkerchief just to start searching for a new one in his suitcase while answering, “That doesn’t make it a date.”

“What would you like to say to him?”

“I’m still considering.” Hannibal folded and slipped a new maroon handkerchief in the pocket of his suit jacket, and returned to the bathroom to have a look at it in the mirror. “I

might hint at his dreams. I know he has nightmares because of what I've done to him."

"I don't think that's what you would like to say to him. That's just what you are planning to say."

Doctor Lecter must have decided that he didn't like the brown handkerchief either, because he took it out and put it aside. He removed his necktie as well, and lined a cream-colored silk scarf around his neck instead. He gave no reply.

"You look splendid," Bedelia commented encouragingly.

Hannibal pressed his lips together with disdain. "Splendid is not enough," he answered shortly. "He hasn't seen me in half a year; I have to look *perfect.*"

He turned to search for another scarf.

"What you are wearing won't make any difference to him, I hope you know that."

"I do."

"Then, why are you spending the whole morning trying different pieces of clothes for your outfit?"

"I want to look in a way that will burn in his brain like acid, so that he won't be able to forget about it for the longest time possible." Hannibal kept a pause, and then he added with sudden bitterness appearing in his voice, "Because that's what I'm going to feel when seeing him. And I want him to go through the same torture."

"If that's what you are aiming for, you are going to attain your goal for sure." That was all Bedelia replied. She turned back to her novel and continued reading.

Hannibal changed the arrangement of his second scarf five times, and then ended up putting it back in his suitcase, beginning to try different neckties anew.

Crawford saw with content that Will had done as he had been told and even washed his hair. Though the redness of his inflamed eyes, the unstoppable trembling of his hands and the pained jaundice of his skin were still overt signs of his inward suffering. And, as Jack stepped next to the younger man by the entrance of the building to hearteningly pat his shoulder, he could feel the shockingly strong smell of alcohol lingering around Will's mouth. Graham was nothing like the sober and clear-headed helper Crawford had been hoping for, but at least he had made some vague efforts to look a bit better than yesterday. Therefore, Jack decided not to chide him for his still pitiful appearance.

"Do you understand the importance of this conversation?" Crawford asked while pressing an entry card into Will's sweaty palm. "Come, we'll go to one of the labs. The experts have already prepared the technical tools."

Will followed him mutely.

“Have you heard my question?” Jack turned back to the younger man.

“I have.” Will’s vocal cords worked with grating difficulty as the enervated words left his lips. “And yes, I understand how important this is.”

“Try to talk to him, and especially, try to make him talk.”

“I’ll do that,” Graham assented languidly. “Is there anything in particular you want me to tell him?”

“Not really. But it’s vital that you should prepare an answer for anything he might say or do so that the conversation won’t break. He should keep talking. I’ll record everything he tells you, and we’ll also analyze the pictures.”

Will nodded in silence.

Crawford wondered whether Hannibal might mention the online dating site. He hoped that it wouldn’t be the case, but he was ready to give an explanation to Will afterwards if Doctor Lecter came up with the topic of the previous online conversations. The worst thing that could happen was that Jack would have to come clean with Will about the plan to catch Lecter. But somehow, he got the feeling that Hannibal would primarily use the live conversation to talk about deeper questions, not a weak trap he had already mocked during their correspondence. And even if Hannibal mentioned online dating, hopefully, he would only slip implications which are easy to misconstrue, especially as heavily under the influence of alcohol as Will was.

“What do you think he is planning to say to you?” Jack asked.

Will pulled the left corner of his mouth into a lopsided, mirthless smile. “Probably something witty and sarcastic, trying to show off.”

“And are you ready with one or two sentences as a reply to his remarks?”

“I’ll figure out a few words. If I don’t have any better idea, I’ll use some clichés about him being a monster.”

“Alright. That should work.”

Will shrugged, uttering in a shaky mumble, “I hope so.”

Hannibal placed the switched-off iPad in front of him on the hotel table.

“Is my posture cold and indifferent enough?” he asked Bedelia while aligning the screen.

“It is.” Doctor Du Maurier assured him.

Hannibal framed a new question, wonderingly, “Wouldn’t it be more beneficial to the purpose if I leant a bit further backwards, away from the camera?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary.”

“I don’t want to make the impression that I’m too interested.”

“You won’t.” Bedelia meant what she had said. If it hadn’t been for the long months of listening to nothing else but Hannibal’s constant struggling with the loss of Will, she would have readily believed now that Doctor Lecter hadn’t even paid a speck of attention to the memory of his disloyal friend. He was as calm and dispassionate as if he had completely lost any kind of interest in Will. Somehow, he had managed to put a perfectly relaxed and casually indifferent expression on his face.

Hannibal broke the silence again in a forceless tone, “I have never lied to him about my feelings. Never pretended not to have feelings for him... This is going to be the first time I’ll try to deceive him like this.”

“And why do you think it might be useful to do so now?”

“I don’t want to look vulnerable. Once I gave him the chance to see my true face, my weaknesses, my inner world, and he only used that to circumvent me. This is a gift I won’t ever give him again.”

Bedelia gently shook her head. “You also said that you still wanted to have him in your life,” she remarked. “Which one is the truth? Are you done with wasting your trust on him, or are you ready to give it to him once more?”

Hannibal made a stiff motion to adjust the iPad on the table. “Could you please stop asking these questions? This is already difficult enough for me without you twisting the blade in the wound.”

“I understand. But you’ll have to decide on this before talking to him.”

Doctor Lecter continued making pointless attempts to enhance the angle of the iPad. It was already in the best position. Yet, he spent a while organizing it and its surroundings before leaving it at its initial place. When he looked up, his eyes seemed darker than before; his voice sounded freezing cold. “I won’t let him get to me again.”

Bedelia chose a place from where she would be able to see Will’s picture on the screen, but she could avoid being recorded.

She hoped that the conversation would not go horribly wrong. Seeing how disinterested Hannibal had managed to make himself look was not the most encouraging sign though. She had expected her plan to reach a phase by now where it already showed the fruits of her hard work, but she had to accept that this wasn’t the case.

Actually, the situation looked plain disappointing. Hannibal put on the mask of his usual tricks, ready to start a new mind game, without the faintest sign of the fact that he had understood in depth what Doctor Du Maurier had been explaining to him for weeks now. Most probably, Will was going to do the same. He was going to pick up the gauntlet, and both men were going to get caught up in the same useless, self-torturous psychological fight they had always been trapped in. They weren't strong enough to change the pattern.

Bedelia drew a disillusioned sigh.

The messaging program let out a beeping noise, signaling that the line was ready for the video call.

For a few seconds, the pace of Hannibal's breathing slightly quickened, but then he managed to regain control over it and slow it down to an almost unnatural speed. After making sure that he re-created the aura of perfect disinterest and confidence, Doctor Lecter clicked in the window to start the call.

When Bedelia saw Will Graham on the other end of the line, she felt real sadness. Will looked miserable. Unhealthy, unattended, and deep in pain. Endless hatred darkened his pale blue irises, his hands were taut, both fists clenched on the slab of the table. He looked straight into Doctor Lecter's eyes.

Hannibal leaned back in his armchair, and gave the younger man a faint, malevolent smile as if he regarded the whole situation as some sort of insubstantial entertainment. He even made a casual motion to set the contrast ratio on the iPad as if some superficial technical details were more important to him than to pay attention to Will.

With his fingers cramped, Will made some constrained motions to compulsively adjust the camera on his side too.

Hannibal turned back to him lazily, while his fake smile showed content.

Bedelia suspected that Doctor Lecter was preparing his well-thought comment about Will's nightmares, but just when Hannibal's mouth made a light stir and before the first syllable could leave his lips, the hard-set enmity burned out in Graham's eyes. All of a sudden, the mask of Will's unnatural coldness crumbled, his facial muscles started twitching, and the next moment, he collapsed on the slab of the table, hiding his head behind his arms.

Bedelia saw Hannibal's palms become instantly tense around the iPad. For a moment, Doctor Lecter stared at Will's shoulders, which were shaking now with forceful convulsions.

And then Hannibal broke the video call with an abrupt drag of his fingers on the virtual keyboard. Pushing the electronic device aside on the table, he got up, and walked to the rear window of the hotel room.

He stood there for a very long time, with his back to Doctor Du Maurier, in complete silence, without a stir.

Apart

Jack Crawford stood behind the palmtop frozen and unable to speak. He watched the shivering pile of stained, colorless jacket and disorderly curls of dark hair; the ruins of the man doubling up with pain over the slab of the table. The silence of the room was filled with Will's drunken, hoarse sobs.

A sea of remorse flooded Crawford's heart.

Eventually, Graham mustered enough strength to swallow back his suffering, and lifted his head up, straightening his back. His blue eyes were bloodshot and swollen.

"I'm sorry, I screwed up," he bumbled.

"No, no, I'm the one who should apologize." Jack let out a sad sigh. "I shouldn't have put you through this." He stepped beside Will, and placed his palm on the younger man's shoulder. "I'm truly sorry."

"You did what you had to do."

"Are you going to be alright?" Crawford asked, concerned.

Closing his eyes, Will gave his reply with a pained groan, "He... he is my enemy... and he loves me for who I am... and hates me for who I am... And I love him for who he is... and hate him for who he is. This is a vicious cycle we will never be able to break free from." He shook his head. "It's all we have left. Hurting each other without any point, just because that's what we are capable of doing... Even if he ends up in jail, and I go and try to live my life, or if I end up in jail and he goes and tries to live his life, we won't be able to do anything else... We'll circle back to the start, just with different methods and different games... But with only one result: torturing each other. While he is my only friend." And he added in broken, tremulous breaths, "And... and I turned my back on this, trying to live without him, but it hurts so much... It hurts so much... He killed everyone who could have eased the pain. And... and I can't stop loving him." Will made a shaky motion to rub his watery eyes. "No, I'll never be alright, but it's not your fault."

It was the first time Crawford had heard Will speak this plainly about his relationship to Lecter. He had no idea what to say to this, he just made an uncertain step towards the coffee machine to bring a cup of lemon tea for Will.

When Hannibal finally spoke, his voice was weak. "He gave up on me."

Doctor Du Maurier found herself unable to respond, which was a rare thing to happen, taking into consideration of the fact that her profession had taught her to be able to react to all kinds

of situations. In order to give herself some time, she turned to check her iPad on the table, which had been violently pushed aside by Doctor Lecter.

Hannibal continued slowly, “I expected him to chase me, to do anything in his power to find me, to become obsessed with capturing me.” He crossed his arms as tightly as if he was protecting himself from cold. “And now he didn’t talk to me, didn’t try to outsmart me, and didn’t do anything to pick a fight... He gave up on me.”

Bedelia stepped behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“He suffers,” she said frankly. “The only thing he could do was mangle the part of him which wanted to play along your cruel games. But he’ll never erase the pain. He is suffocating in self-loathing, compunction and loneliness.” Her voice suddenly turned somber as she added, “Is that what you wanted for him? Because if yes, then it’s time to gloat.”

Doctor Lecter’s shoulders made a nearly intangible tremble. He turned to look Bedelia in the eye, letting her see the cold pain in his maroon irises while answering, “I wanted him to be happy. With me.”

“That’s not what you did today.”

“After the way he betrayed me, how could I still want to see him happy?”

“In that case, it’s your day of victory now. You’ve made him crumble under the weight of two equally horrible choices: either to chase you and play your games again, giving you exactly what you want, or to live without you, trapped among the reminiscences of the horrors you did to him, blaming and hating himself for not trying to fight... Both options only good to torment and haunt him for the rest of his life. You won.”

Hannibal turned away again to look out the window as he spoke in an almost inaudible whisper, “I’m supposed to be happy now.”

“Are you not?”

“I presume you are entirely aware of the fact that I’m not happy.” Doctor Lecter’s voice sounded slightly less patient than usual, yet, equally aloof. “And I know what you want to say... Yes, he is not like my other victims. He is not just my victim but the only person I’ve ever loved.”

“But if you treat him like your usual victims, every step you take towards him is just going to push him further away from you.”

“What else could I do?”

“You already know. But I’m afraid it’s too late.”

Hannibal closed his eyes as he murmured, “It is.”

-

Will stood on the doorstep of his house and wished for a moment for everything to turn into ashes. Somehow, the idea of watching all his belongings and every part of his home getting destroyed and disappear into nothing was more attractive than to step inside and continue his life.

One of his hungry dogs dragged him out of numb pain. His fox terrier grabbed a bowl and clinked it against the wall as an eager sign for Will to give them dinner.

“Okay, okay,” Will mumbled, and staggered inside to scatter some food for the impatiently crowding dogs.

While the animals started their dinner happily, Will took Hannibal’s twelve-page-long letter from his coffee table. The papers started rustling in his hand, his fingers were trembling so violently. For a few minutes, he stood by the table like a statue, and then let the letter fall back onto the wooden surface. Wiping off some exuded cold sweat from his neck, he started circling with quick-paced, restless steps around the room.

After the tenth round, he suddenly returned to the coffee table, grabbed the papers again, and then threw them in the flames of his fireplace with desperate force. The fire intensified, and the long pages of the meticulously written letter turned into blackish shreds in the blink of an eye.

Will collapsed on the couch, and pulled the blanket over his head, hiding himself from the world.

“Eat a lot,” he instructed his dogs with a tired groan from underneath his cover, “Because I’m going to drink until I black out for the longest time possible, so you won’t get anything for a while.”

Jack Crawford was sitting alone in his office, watching the screen of his palmtop. He was looking at Caroline123’s profile. During the weeks of talking to Caroline online, he had spent hours examining this page, re-reading the very few information Caroline had revealed, re-checking her obscure photo a thousand times... And now he kept staring at it supposedly for one last time.

So, that was the end. It had to be the end. Jack told himself that he would figure out some other way to find Lecter one day. But now this had to stop. This was not right, deceiving Will and torturing him at the same time. The poor man had suffered enough.

With a click in his browser, Crawford removed Caroline’s profile from his list of favorite pages. As a result of this, the list became empty; Caroline had been the only link added.

Then Jack closed his eyes, and leaned back in his chair, trying hard not to think about anything.

And the very next moment, he heard the brief, high-pitched sound of his palmtop. His messaging program signaled him that Caroline123 had just sent him a new mail on International Love.

Bedelia walked the streets of Florence alone.

She was displeased that her plan hadn't worked. Somehow, deep in her heart, she had hoped that after weeks of well-planned therapeutic talks with Doctor Lecter, the video call would be enough to break the ice and make Hannibal give at least a slight positive sign to Will. No matter how slight, but something which could have shown Will that Hannibal was ready to change the pattern, capable of breaking free from the chains of his usual masks and sadistic games... But now she saw that she had been mistaken. Love was not enough to melt away the enmity and the self-imposed torment which parted the two men from each other for the rest of their lives.

Even though it was really sad, Bedelia accepted that she couldn't do anything to change it. Hannibal had said it was too late, and he was right. Life was like that. Some things just broke, and couldn't be repaired. And, maybe, this relationship had been irreparable right from the start.

It seemed like both a professional and a personal failure to her that she had been unable to help, but she chose to accept it. Perhaps, one day she would find a way to make up for the pain she had caused with her unsuccessful plan. Now all she could do was try to put this all behind her.

She entered a bar and ordered a drink, but then had enough of the three men sitting in the corner, boozing beer and gazing shamelessly at her, so she soon left the place.

She wished that her plan had turned out right. Hannibal and Will were a perfect match in terms of their mental capacity, their emotional disorders, and all their other pathologies. It mesmerized her that two twisted and distorted minds like these had been able to find such pure love. Even healthy people who hadn't gone through that much nightmarish darkness and who knows what kind of other horrors in their lives were unable to experience a connection so strong. The way Hannibal and Will needed each other, in spite of the circumstances that forced them to stay enemies, wrung her heart. Bedelia regarded this as beautiful, and she wished she could have created something good from the pointless suffering. It made her utterly unhappy that she couldn't.

She went down to the river, and spent an hour standing by the water, watching the waves rushing by. The melancholy of the cloudy weather surrounded her with the pale gray of the impending rainfall. It perfectly reflected her mood.

When the intensifying gushes of wind started to turn stormy, she chose to walk back to their hotel.

She opened the door of their room while making a practiced motion to remove a golden pin from her hairdo. Placing it on her night stand, she wanted to pluck another hairpin... When she suddenly perceived that something was not quite right.

Slowly, she turned around.

Hannibal stood in the corner of their room stationary, with her iPad in his hands; his eyes colder than Baltimore winter. He hadn’t said a single word, just glared at her mutely.

And Bedelia instantly knew what had happened. Hannibal had found Will Graham’s profile on International Love and the messages ‘Caroline’ had exchanged with ‘Will’...

The horrifying way Doctor Lecter looked at her made her heart miss a beat.

The Truth

The survival instinct in Doctor Du Maurier was screaming that she should run for the door, but the rational part of her mind knew that Hannibal was way faster than she could ever be with her high heels on. There was no use running. It would only worsen her situation.

“I... I presume you know everything,” she managed to speak after the moments of shock. Her voice sounded foreign as if it were someone else’s, not her own.

From the corner of her eye she saw that Hannibal’s suitcase was packed, while her belongings were still everywhere around the room. She tried not to jump to any kind of conclusion because she was afraid that if she did, she would not be able to suppress the panic growing in her.

When Hannibal finally replied, his words were sharp and clear like icicles. “You betrayed my trust in the vilest way.”

Bedelia struggled to silence the voice in her head which was reiterating the same sentence with a constant pace... *He is going to kill you... He is going to kill you...*

She managed to preserve as much composure as possible, and put perfect calmness into her answer, “I sincerely hope that betray is a strong word to describe what I’ve done.”

The doctor’s eyes darted at the woman with shocking intensity. “You’ve tried to steal him.”

Doctor Du Maurier momentarily forgot about her circumstances, and uttered with plain incomprehension, “I beg your pardon?”

“My Will. You tried to seduce him.” The eerily calm, slow pace of Doctor Lecter’s words was scarier than mad wrath. “You sent him gifts and letters to make him yours.”

Bedelia’s eyes grew wide. “Wait a minute. You think that I–”

“I have read some parts of your past conversations. You were flirting with him.”

“No, this is a misunderstanding.”

“*I’ll do whatever you like?*” Hannibal quoted from one of the older messages with threatening coldness freezing his tone. “Is there any other way to construe this? Or when you wrote him that you wanted him to fantasize about kissing you?!”

“Please, let me explain...”

Hannibal flung the iPad against the wall with tremendous force. The electronic device broke into small pieces of frame fractures and shards, and landed on the floor followed by loud jingling. Bedelia hurriedly took a step in the direction of the door.

The next moment, Doctor Lecter was already standing in front of her, grabbing her by the neck, and pushed her against the wall with so much pressure that Doctor Du Maurier couldn't breathe. Hannibal uttered in a snarl, "While you were talking to me about facing my feelings for him, you secretly stole my ideas. You tried to win his attention and charm him... Used my gifts to get closer to him! My ideas... to attract him. The sapphire sculpture I showed you in a shop window... The carved wooden box I searched with so much care... And the postcard I spent so many sleepless nights choosing... My own ideas to admire him..." Doctor Lecter's words faded into an unintelligible murmur of pained anger.

Bedelia tried to protest, but her windpipe was close to being crushed by the strong arm tensing against it. She struggled to shake her head, but even that motion proved to be impossible as the shortness of breath and the pain of pressure grew stronger.

Hannibal mustered enough mental strength to continue with composed words, "And he didn't stop talking to you. He accepted your blatant, shameless attempts to flirt with him!"

For a second, the strength of his grip loosened on Bedelia's neck because of badly suppressed agitation, and this brief time was enough for her to quickly utter, "No, it wasn't him, please, listen to me..."

But Hannibal didn't wait for the second half of the answer. "And I thought you wanted to help me," he spoke with growing bitterness, "While you cheated on me with Will... While he cheated on me with you!"

"Please, it was not Will! I wasn't talking to him... please..."

"You are both going to pay for this!" Doctor Lecter pushed her down on the floor. Bedelia heard a bloodcurdling thump as she dropped to her knees.

And then Hannibal took his suitcase, and left the room with swift steps. The door closed behind him with a harsh bang.

Doctor Du Maurier collapsed on the floor, wheezing.

When Hannibal was already alone, passing the corridors of their hotel and leaving through the back door, the mask of anger and pain quickly disappeared from his features. A faint, but contented smile became visible in the corners of his mouth.

He briskly signaled for a cab, and ordered the driver to take him to the airport.

Bedelia managed to get to her feet on the third attempt. Pain shot up her kneecaps, but she neglected it. She staggered outside the room and checked the corridor. There was no one out there; Hannibal was already gone.

What have I done? The question rushed through her head. She was not certain about what Hannibal was up to, but one thing was for sure: it couldn't be anything good. He was most probably planning to hurt Will, or hurt her in one way or another to avenge her secret game.

After some fruitless attempts to adjust her torn nylon stockings, she limped down the stairs, and rushed to the reception counter.

"Excuse me, is there internet connection to that computer behind your desk?" she panted, still massaging her neck where Hannibal had held her.

The receptionist gave her an uncertain nod, which must have likely meant that she might use the computer if it was really that urgent, so Doctor Du Maurier quickly passed round the counter.

She sat down, but when she tried to log in to her International Love account, she couldn't. She entered her user name and password, but the site displayed a 'failed attempt' error message over and over again. She realized that Doctor Lecter must have changed her password or deleted her account somehow. And now she was unable to communicate this way.

For a moment, she considered simply escaping as fast as she could, leaving everything behind and trying to hide in one of the most densely populated cities of the world before it would be too late... But she soon put the idea out of her mind.

She decided that it was high time to truly make this right and face the consequences of her actions.

Will had been heavily drinking after Hannibal's escape, but he hadn't drunk as much as he did now. He put three bottles of vodka on his coffee table, and simply started drinking one shot after another. One from the first, one from the second, one from the third, and he continued until he completely lost track of what he was doing.

After a while, he had no idea how much he had already drunk, he forgot about everything, and the clear thoughts ultimately fell into pieces in his head. The world melted into shapeless darkness.

And the only thing he wished for was never waking up again.

Jack Crawford spent his day drowning in paper work after an unsuccessful intervention which was operated by the FBI and resulted in the death of kidnapped victims. It was depressing and disappointing enough, and the Agents of the FBI Internal Affairs Unit investigating his possible responsibility for the devastating outcome didn't boost his mood either.

Moreover, the FBI had received an anonymous call from a woman – from an overseas prepaid cell – that Will's life might be in danger, Hannibal might want to attempt to hurt him in some way. So in every second hour or so, Jack listened to the short report of the patrol car he had ordered to secure Will's home. Nothing suspicious so far, but it didn't ease his worries.

And the next afternoon, an officer from the visitor management desk called him in his office.

"In the visitor area, there's a woman who wants to talk to you. She says it's urgent."

Jack started wondering if he expected any official visit, but he couldn't name any. He gave a tired order, "Tell one of the secretaries to handle it."

"She wants to talk to you in person."

An averse frown appeared on Crawford's forehead. "I have no time for anyone right now. Ask her to fill the necessary request forms and come back again after she scheduled an appointment."

"She says it's very important."

Jack threw a glimpse at his watch: he had few minutes before lunch and still two more risk assessments to evaluate. He framed a last impatient question though, "What else has she said?"

"That her name is Caroline."

Will woke up to the cold air tingling the back of his neck. At first, he pulled the blanket over his shoulders and tried to continue his hazy, drunken slumber. But the freezing touches of cool wind kept him awake.

He let out a displeased growl, and turned to see the source of the annoying change of temperature. The front door was wide open.

What?! Will sat up, trying to blink away the fog of drunkenness. Did he leave the door open? But when? And how? It was definitely locked when he fell unconscious.

He edgily ran his fingers along his forehead, trying to ease the pain of hangover tearing into his temple. Was it possible that he forgot to lock the door? *No... no...*

He felt that something was not right. Where were his dogs for example?

He called out the names of the dogs as loud as he managed after the drunken sleep, and waited for the familiar noise of claws pattering on the floor, foreshowing the arrival of the pack. But no noise. Nothing. Complete silence.

Okay, they must have found something interesting outside, then.

Holding the armrest of the couch firmly, Will managed to get up, and then he lurched along, towards the open front door while shouting the dogs' names anew.

This time he heard a muffled, distant bark coming from the outside, so he turned in the direction the sound had arrived from. The front porch was empty, but he spotted a patrol car standing nearby. It had already been parked outside for a day now, and Will knew that the FBI had sent it for some unknown reason to keep an eye on him. Before he fell unconscious, from the window he saw two police officers sipping coffee next to the vehicle, but there was no sign of them now. The car was empty.

And as Will kept looking around, he noticed another vehicle on the opposite side. A gray van parked not far from his home. A small whine arrived from the direction of that truck. *Winston*...

The pace of Will's steps quickened, and he rushed to the van. He went round it with reeling, confused haste. He still couldn't see his dogs, though he could hear Winston's displeased whimper again. *Where are they?*

Will turned towards the side of the vehicle. The rear door was not fully closed, and after a moment of hesitation, he pushed it open.

The sight that greeted him made him stand rooted in astonishment.

His dogs were there, in the back of the truck, placed in dog carriers, locked in, orderly arranged, each in an own box with appropriate size.

"What the hell...?!" Will rubbed his forehead, and tried to concentrate. Had he managed to drink so much that he had ultimately ruined his own sanity and developed weird hallucinations? What on earth had happened to his dogs?

There was even a pack of dog food standing beside the boxes. As he kept watching the luggage filling the space among the boxes, he recognized his own fishing gear also placed in the corner of the back of the vehicle. All parts of the fishing set packed and neatly fixed for transport.

And suddenly, he heard steps.

Will turned in an insecure swirl, and when he saw who was arriving from the direction of his house, his heart leaped.

Hannibal Lecter was walking towards the truck with paced, calm steps. He was wearing a long, dark coat with a burgundy scarf. And he held a smaller dog carrier in his arms. The box contained Will's fox terrier, which was now glaring angrily at his owner as if blaming him for letting this heinous capture happen.

Return

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Doctor Du Maurier felt her pulse slightly quicken while she was escorted to Crawford's office. She was not sure what was going to happen to her, but she tried to prepare herself for anything that might be in store for her. Basically, she expected Crawford to instantly order someone to handcuff her and take her to an interrogation room, and that she would spend the rest of her day being interviewed and cross-examined. But before she was left alone with Jack Crawford in his office, the FBI Agent hadn't given any order to his subordinates to chain her. He started to organize papers on his desk.

"Please, take a seat, Doctor," he told her without looking at her.

This was not the start Bedelia expected after introducing herself as Caroline, but she tried not to let this development throw her off the track.

"I need your help," she said, sitting down on the chair opposite the desk. She paused because she believed that the man was going to instantly say a few words to this, or at least ask something, but Crawford mutely waited for her to speak.

"It's about Hannibal," she continued. "I think I made a mistake, and now he wants to take revenge." She stopped again, waiting for a response, for an avalanche of questions, but nothing. Silence.

Doctor Du Maurier started again, "I need your help with stopping him. I believe he wants to hurt me... and Will Graham too."

Crawford seemed quite busy with ordering piles of documents on his desk. "Certainly, that should be avoided," he answered with some delay, keeping his eyes on the papers.

"Will's life might be in danger."

"After your call, I've already sent someone over to check on him." Jack turned towards the telephone on his desk, and dialed a number. He gave a brief order to one of his subordinates to re-check the patrol car nearby Will's house. He still hadn't looked at the woman sitting opposite him.

Doctor Du Maurier found the situation odder and odder. However, she tried to continue as she planned, "I'm willing to give you any assistance you might need with the investigation. And I understand that you'll also need to examine my involvement in this case."

"Yes, that's the procedure. Someone's going to take your statement."

And that was all Jack said. Silence again.

Bedelia started to find the atmosphere embarrassingly tense. She made an attempt to proceed, trying to remain undisturbed, “I want you to know that I’m indeed ready to help you catch Hannibal, and this is not a trick in any way...”

She stopped speaking when she saw Crawford returning to the ordering of his documents. She really had to notice now that the always so determined and goal-directed man was suspiciously silent and definitely avoided looking at her.

“Is there a problem, Agent Crawford?”

Something visibly awkward and hasty appeared in the so-far mechanical motions the FBI Agent made to arrange his documents. His reply was constrained, “No, nothing. Go on, please.”

Bedelia lightly tilted her head to one side.

“But you do seem to be ill-at-ease,” she insisted.

“It’s... it’s just the last message you wrote.” Crawford cleared his throat. “I mean... It’s not that I have any problem with it, I’m just... I’m just a bit uncertain how to react now. I haven’t been in a situation like this for at least two decades; I’m not even sure what to think about it.”

Bedelia tried to remember what she wrote last. Maybe something about the chosen time or method of the video call? She couldn’t recall anything that could be the cause of this strange reply.

“Most probably, there must be some kind of misunderstanding,” she tried to reason.

“Most probably.” Crawford’s tone was anything but convincing.

“I don’t think I wrote anything in my last message that could lead to this discomfort.”

“I wouldn’t use the word *discomfort*. On the contrary. I... er...” The overtly uncomfortable expression intensified on Jack Crawford’s face. “Alright, let’s get back to the topic of Hannibal; that should be our priority right now. How exactly do you intend to assist the FBI, Doctor?”

“I presume I know him better than anyone else here. I might be able to help predict where he might plan to go,” Bedelia gave a short reply, and then decided not to let Crawford drop the former subject, so she switched back to it, “Could you please name what made my last message extraordinary?”

“You don’t think that it was a bit... surprising?”

“I don’t think I wrote anything surprising.”

When Bedelia saw the way Crawford suddenly stared at her after hearing her reply, she knew that there was definitely something weird going on. She asked, “Can you show me the message in question, please?”

The FBI Agent leaned to the drawer of his desk, and took out his palmtop. He set it on the table without a word, switched it on, searched for a link, and then turned it towards her, so that Doctor Du Maurier could read the online conversation 'Caroline' and 'Will' had had on International Love. She noticed that after the brief messages she had sent 'Will', there was a last, much longer and way more detailed mail sent by Caroline123, though it was definitely not written by her.

With growing surprise, she started reading the message.

"Dear Agent Crawford,

I need to express my apologies. Yes, I know that it was you who used Will's data to create an online profile for him. When I first saw the link, I suspected that an FBI Agent or group of Agents had made it, since I was sure right from the start that it wasn't Will. My initial guess had already been you, though I needed some time to become certain about it.

I used my first messages to check whether I was talking to the same person or several Agents. And then I ultimately concluded from the quickness you managed to gain information about the color of the gift I had sent Will that I was right and you were the one I was talking to. I don't think Will would have revealed the nature of the gift with such delay – but still quite quickly – to anyone else.

I'm very sorry for not being completely honest with you; I'm trying to redeem myself now. I led you to believe that you were talking to Hannibal, but you weren't. In fact, you were indeed talking to the woman you saw on the picture. And I was not telling lies when I told you that you knew me in person. The last time we met, you wanted to use me to get closer to Hannibal. And I think you know now who I am.

It's time for me to clear this matter up. After what happened during the video call, I chose to abandon my plan. Originally, I wanted to create a situation where Hannibal and Will might be able to find a way to get past their boundaries and ingrown loneliness with the help of true love. I meant to help them, but I had to sadly see that my plan had only led to the suffering of all parties involved, and therefore, I don't want to continue this any longer. I'll delete my profile from International Love, and this is the last mail I'll send you.

But before I finish, let me also add a personal matter to my message. I have always found your intelligence and charisma attractive. And, as you see now, I knew it all along that I was talking to you online. And I must admit, I enjoyed speaking to you more than speaking with all the other men I met throughout the site. I considered this for a while, and I think it would be a most pleasant idea if we developed our relationship to a more intense level. Do you want to try it with me?

I understand that this might seem too sudden, and more like an imposition right now, so you can take as much time with your answer as you need. I just wanted you to know that I'm very much interested in you. You don't need to reply now; I'll visit you soon, and you can tell me your answer in person.

Best wishes,

‘Caroline’

P.S.: I don’t mean to pressure you to say yes, but I must mention that I’d love to see how dominant you could be with me behind closed doors, with your bossy style.”

Bedelia gazed at the message for a few long, mute seconds.

“It’s... it’s not...” She had to swallow before she continued speaking. “I didn’t write this.”

Crawford crossed his arms, turning away from the screen. “I’ve figured now from your reaction.”

“It was Hannibal,” she said, her voice still weak.

“Why?”

Now it was Doctor Du Maurier’s turn to cast her eyes down. She hadn’t blushed since the age of thirteen, but now she felt some suspicious heat creeping on her cheeks.

In spite of the awkward situation, she couldn’t help but smile.

Will was still not sure what was happening, but seeing Doctor Lecter had such an intense effect on him that he couldn’t care about the answers anymore.

Hannibal placed the last dog into the truck next to the others with calm resolution, but when he turned back to Will afterwards, the mild glimmer in his dark eyes and the tension of his facial muscles revealed that his emotional state was inwardly far from the peaceful dispassion he showed.

Will’s hands started shaking with an almost painful tremor. It felt as if fluid ice was circulating in his veins instead of blood, his limbs turned so cold in a flash. He wanted to say something, to form at least one normal sentence like a question about what the hell Hannibal was doing to his fishing set or his dogs, but the only thing he could emit was a short, guttural sound.

And then his knees gave in to the emotional shock and to the too much vodka consumed. He overbalanced, and his body was close to collapsing on the ground.

But instead of meeting jagged, stony surface, he found himself in Hannibal’s strong arms. His forehead pressed against the doctor’s neck, and his quivering hands clutched at the older man’s coat with blind force.

He was there... Really there... Will still couldn’t believe it, though he could feel it now in all its intensity. He could even sense the warmth of Doctor Lecter’s body through the multiple layers of clothes.

And just when he thought this was the most absurd storm of sensations he could take, Hannibal started closely smelling him.

Will realized with a dismayed shudder running along his spine that he must be stinking from alcohol and unkemptness.

They were standing there behind the truck, in each other's arms, tight in a now pointless, but painfully forceful embrace... And Hannibal was slowly, meticulously smelling first Will's neck, then his hair, then his bearded jaw, then the front part of his jacket, and then his mouth.

After finishing the careful examination of Will's smell, Hannibal slipped one hand between their bodies, under the younger man's sweater, and put his palm on the scar across his abdomen. Will let out an unwitting growl when he felt cold fingers pressing against his skin through his t-shirt.

"It's larger than I thought," the doctor murmured into the curls of Will's hair.

"They opened it further during surgery." Will's answer came in short-breathed gasps. He moved even closer to the other man. He was not sure that with doing so, he wanted to push Hannibal's hand away, or he wanted to let the touch intensify.

Hannibal slid his hand under the t-shirt, and ran his fingertips along the bare surface of the scarred tissue.

Will realized that he had been softly kneading the muscles of the doctor's back for a while, though he had been doing it unintentionally.

"I hate you for everything you did to me," Will whispered against Doctor Lecter's coat.

Hannibal's fingers didn't stop; they started exploring every single detail of the scar with aimed, slow motions.

"I hate you too for what you did to me." The doctor's response was quiet, calm, yet bitter.

Will's whole body shook from the emotional exertion, and he buried his face deeper into the collar of the doctor's coat while giving his answer, "I should try to kill you right now."

Hannibal moved his fingers gently, but decidedly, discovering the little curves of the tormented flesh of the scar. "I should try to kill you too."

"I should use the most painful method possible..." Will added, his voice muffled by the doctor's scarf.

"I should choose the most agonizing way..." Hannibal responded while giving a last, tender caress to Will's scar with his fingertips, and then removed his hand from underneath the younger man's t-shirt in order to be able to embrace him with both arms. "Torture you..."

Will took some deep breaths, and then looked up to face Doctor Lecter, watching him through blurred, unsteady eyes, taking in the sight of the doctor's high cheekbones, pale skin, and every familiar line of his serene expression.

He said in a broken sigh, “I despise you more than anything.”

And then he rubbed his mouth to the older man’s lips, letting their surroundings fade into the shadows of his recurring dreams.

Hannibal froze with surprise when he felt Will’s kiss on his lips. He was prepared for a lot of reactions and a lot of complex mental impacts he might experience, but he was definitely not prepared for Will kissing him.

There was no rational way to describe it. He felt an unpleasant, clammy pressure on his lips and the taste of cheap liquor. He should’ve flinched, should’ve undergone repulsion, but he felt something entirely else instead...

He would’ve given all the months spent at five-star hotels, eating most exquisite foods, visiting beautiful landscapes and seeing wonderful towns... for a single second of this alcohol-smelling, sticky, stubbly touch on his mouth.

“Will...” He wanted to say something, but his mind seemed to have drifted to another state. Somehow, everything turned shapeless and elusive when Will’s mouth was stroking his.

The next moment, he chose not to contemplate any longer. He pressed his fingers to the back of Will’s head, and forced the younger man with sudden strength to deepen the kiss. Teeth were grazing, warm breaths filled his mouth, and he pushed his tongue hungrily against Will’s. He could feel the taste of vodka mixed with the bitterness of pills and the sour, acidy undertone of starvation. He could literally taste every hour of loneliness and self-loathing Will had gone through, and it seemed to him that through the desperate, forceful kiss, Will could also feel the pain the doctor had to endure without him.

The kiss showed too much, and Hannibal knew it, but it was too late to do anything against it. These were the moments of raw, strange happiness.

They only stopped kissing when their jaws were already aching from the unusual effort, and they were both disgracefully panting, out of breath.

It almost made Hannibal feel uncomfortable how unprepared and instinctive the words were which suddenly escaped his lips. “I don’t want you to have a life without me... because I don’t want to live in a world which doesn’t include you. I’m unable to ultimately let go of you,” he uttered in a rush. After saying these sentences, he saw that it would have been pointless to try to preserve the rest of his pride, it was already in ruins, so he stroked Will’s lips with his mouth again, and finished his confession, “I know that we are out of time, but I can’t stop wanting to risk everything for you again. I still want it.”

“It’s too late.” Will’s answer came in low, pained syllables. “It’s too late for us.”

“I know.”

They continued with the brief caresses of their lips without further talking, giving each other soft pecks.

Finally, one of the dogs got bored with watching the couple's clumsy, unplanned kisses, and let out an impatient bark.

The gruff sound broke the spell cast on the two men, and they parted with a few faltering inhalations. Will wiped off some saliva from his mouth.

"Er, what are you planning to do now?" he asked from the doctor, turning towards the back of the truck with nervous haste.

"I'm preparing everything for my departure."

Will's eyes darkened, though he didn't seem upset. "You are going away again right now, aren't you?"

"Yes." Hannibal put his arms back around Will's waist. "However–," And slowly, but with imperative force, he started pulling the younger man in the direction of the front passenger seat of the van, "Someone, whose opinion I hold in great esteem, managed to convince me not to change my feelings to rational chances. So this time – regardless of it being too late or not – I'm not leaving you behind."

- The End -

Chapter End Notes

So, that was it. :) Thank you all for reading and leaving kudos, comments, bookmarks.
If you might have any questions or if you want to chat or talk, feel free to add me on skype (my ID: maitai1327).
If you are interested in my other Hannibal/Will stories 'A Way To Help', 'Problems', Palace of Dreams' and 'Losing Control', you can read them on fanfiction.net (https://www.fanfiction.net/u/4777211/MaiTai1327).
If you are interested in my other Hannibal/Will story 'The Purple Room', you can read it on a WordPress blog (https://maitaithepurpleroom.wordpress.com).
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